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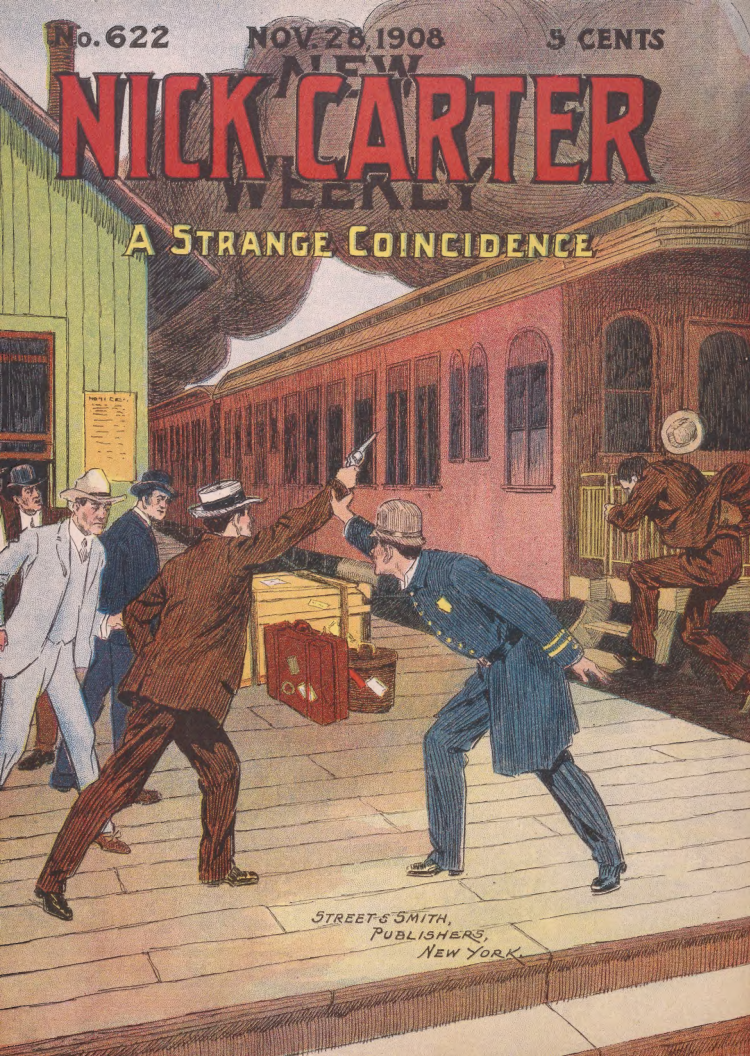
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

OR,

Patsy's Lucky Strike.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

SOME STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES.

"It is a case, Patsy, where there is absolutely no clue to guide you," said Nick Carter, as he dropped into a chair opposite his second assistant. "The crime is ten years old. It is practically forgotten; that is to say, it is as much forgotten as such things ever are. The public has forgotten it. The police, of course, have not. Neither have the attorneys for the parties in interest. And now they come to me and ask us to clear things up for them. I find that my engagements preclude my making any personal effort in the matter; Chick is busy on another case, and so it is up to you. That is the condition, lad."

"It won't be the first time that I have worked alone on a case," replied Patsy, helping himself to a cigar from the box on the table. The two had just entered the detective's study, having adjourned there from the dinner-table. Nick Carter had returned to the city late that afternoon and was due to leave town again by the midnight train. He had found a client awaiting him, and hence the case he was now giving to his second assistant.

"Here is the case in a nut-shell," continued the detective.

"All right, chief."

"Six months ago, or, to be exact, about two weeks before Christmas, John Y. Ransom came to New York City accompanied by his two daughters, Pauline and Irma. Their trip here was ostensibly to make purchases for the approaching Christmas; really, it was to provide a trousseau for Irma Ransom, the younger of the two girls, who was to be married during the latter part of the approaching January. Their home was in Dallas, Texas. They had been spending the last two months in the city of Washington. They did not stop at a hotel while here, but went to a boarding-house kept by a Mrs. Parsons, on this avenue. You will find the address and the few other notes I have made on that slip of paper in your hand."

Patsy nodded affirmatively.

"All three disappeared," said the detective laconically.

"What?" exclaimed Patsy. "All three of them?"

"Yes."

"Well—gee whiz! I suppose some effort was made to find them. I don't remember that we had such a case in this office."

"No. We had no such case. Effort was made to keep the affair as still as possible. Of course, there was a search, but I don't think it was very thorough, Patsy. It was kept from the police, and in reality nothing much was done about it. There was an impression among the interested parties that the case would solve itself—but it never has."

"You mean that the old man and the two girls simply vanished, I suppose?"

"Just that. They left the boarding-house one morning to continue the shopping they had been doing for several days, and not one of them returned; not one of them has been seen since then. They might have gone up in smoke or in a balloon, figuratively speaking. No clue to what they did and no trace of them can be found after they descended the front steps of their boarding-house that morning of their disappearance."

"And that was six months ago?"

"Yes."

"What I can't understand is that nothing has been said about it in the papers, even if we did not hear about it in the office. I should think that the chap who was going to marry Irma would have——"

"That is another tail to the kite, Patsy; that is an additional mystery connected with the affair."

"What is? The fact that he didn't——"

"No; the fact that he couldn't take up the search; that is, not effectively. The truth of the matter is that *he* has disappeared, also."

"It strikes me that that fact ought to simplify the matter—rather."

"It would, under ordinary circumstances, but, as a matter of fact, it doesn't. The fact of James Congdon's disappearance would suggest collusion, in one way or another; but there is no apparent reason for such proceedings. Congdon was in Kansas City when he disappeared; the others were here, in this city. Congdon is a lawyer. He was engaged upon the trial of a case in court at the time. The court adjourned at noon for recess till one o'clock. Congdon went out, supposedly to his dinner, or luncheon, and did not return."

"Humph! That strikes me as mighty odd all around."

"It is."

"When did he disappear, as compared to the time of the disappearance of the others?"

"Forty-eight hours later."

"What, exactly?"

"No; approximately. Ransom and the two young women left their boarding-house a little before ten in the morning. Congdon left the court-room in Kansas City two days later, at noon."

"Had he heard of the disappearance of the others?"

"Nobody knows as to that. The presumption is that he had not."

"Do you associate him with the first disappearances, in New York?"

"I haven't taken the trouble to determine whether I do or not. I haven't given the matter any thought. I am stating the facts to you as I have received them. I must leave the entire case in your hands, and so I haven't formed any ideas about it. In fact, I have a reason for desiring that you work it out alone."

"Very well."

"There is another significant point, which may or may not have something to do with the case, Patsy."

"What is it?"

"I have told you that Ransom was here with his two daughters, Pauline and Irma."

"Yes."

"Well, the fact is that both were *not* his daughters. Pauline was an adopted child."

"Oho!"

"Wait; but I am assured positively that both the girls were ignorant of that fact; that they had no idea they were not sisters; that the truth that both girls were not his daughters was known only to himself and to the lawyer who has engaged our services."

"Do you believe it?"

"I take it for exactly what it is worth. It may or may not be true that Pauline knew she was not John Y. Ransom's daughter—that Irma was not her sister."

"Let me ask another question on that point."

"Well?"

"Suppose she *had* known the truth about it, or had learned it suddenly at or near the time of the disappearance, do you think in that case it would have any bearing upon the facts?"

"I don't know. Apparently not. I wonder if you realize what your question suggests, Patsy?"

"Yes, perfectly. It suggests that Pauline is responsible for the whole thing."

"And that idea, you must admit, is preposterous. At least, it is so when judged from what we know of the circumstances."

"I don't see that we know anything at all about the circumstances," said Patsy.

"We don't know much about them; that's a fact."

"What about the relations between them? The father and the two girls, I mean?"

"Perfect, as far as I was able to determine."

"No quarrel?"

"None that appeared on the surface. They had always seemed fond of one another. They had lived in perfect accord."

"Is there any suggested reason why the old man should——"

"You have twice referred to him as an old man. He is, or was, under fifty. About fifty."

"Well, is there any suggested reason why he should have wished to disappear mysteriously and take the girls with him?"

"Absolutely none. Quite the contrary."

"Is there a financial end to the thing?"

"I can't find one, if I understand your question correctly. Ransom is, or was, a moderately rich man; what you would call well-off. Even his lawyer knows very little about his finances save that Ransom had interests in several ranches, a few mines, and was known to be a man of affairs. He was generally regarded as fairly rich. Since his disappearance, nothing has been found connected with his financial affairs which could suggest any explanation of the mystery."

"Who is behind the search for him?"

"Three of the men with whom he was associated in business affairs. Their only interest in the matter

is to discover whether Ransom is alive or dead. The existing doubt as to that is an annoyance in their business."

"I understand. That is why you were called into the case."

"Yes."

"I suppose you have got pictures of all of them?"

"No; that is what I haven't got. There is a snap-shot picture of Ransom; there is a photograph of Irma, made when she was sixteen; but, although it is known that there were later pictures of all of them, not one can be found."

"Isn't that rather significant?"

"Of course it is significant—if it could be determined who was interested in the disappearance of the photographs."

Patsy nodded his head, and smiled rather grimly; the detective continued:

"You see, Patsy, no matter which way you turn in this matter, you run against a figurative brick wall."

"I see."

"There is no clue. Not one."

"No."

"Pauline, the older of the two girls, had no idea that she was not Ransom's daughter; Irma, the daughter, had no idea that Pauline was not her sister; the neighbors who knew them have never doubted and do not now doubt that both girls were Ransom's daughters. The lawyer who came to me states that he is the only person other than Ransom himself who did know the truth."

"What is the lawyer's name and where can he be found? I judge that he is still here in New York."

"Yes. He is at the Mammoth. His name is King. I told him that I would have to turn the case over to you, and that after I had talked to you about it I would send you to him. He expects you to call upon him at the hotel to-morrow morning."

"Why not to-night?"

"Because I fixed the time myself, for morning. I thought we would wish to discuss it uninterruptedly to-night. To-morrow will be soon enough for you to see him."

CHAPTER II.

PUZZLING COINCIDENCES.

Patsy started to his feet, then seated himself again, with a smile. He had suddenly recalled the words with which the detective had started the conversation. For the moment they had been driven from his mind, but now he remembered them.

"Chief, you said something about a crime that was ten years old, didn't you? What about that?" he asked, and Nick Carter smiled back at him.

"I was beginning to wonder if that remark had slipped past you," he said. "There was a crime committed ten years ago, in Texas, which is very vaguely associated with the present case, Patsy; but the association is so vague that I really doubt if it has anything to do with it. Nevertheless, you should know about it."

"Well?"

"It is this: Ransom at that time lived on a ranch that is located in the vicinity of San Antonio. He owned the ranch and operated it. A man went there to visit him, remained two days and nights, started away in the saddle to ride to San Antonio on the morning of the third day, and was found that same evening dead on the trail. He had been shot from behind. The bullet had entered the back of his head and killed him instantly. Ransom was arrested by the rangers, charged with the crime, was tried, and acquitted; but there are many who still believe him guilty of the shooting. It was known that he had quarreled violently with his guest, during the short visit at the ranch; indeed, he admitted it on the stand; but he also established, to the satisfaction of the jury, that he was at home on the ranch all that day, and, therefore, could not have done the shooting. The dead man's name was Henry Heaton; he was a stranger in Texas. Ransom swore that he knew nothing about the man save that they had met and formed a friendship while traveling."

"I suppose the lawyer, King, told you about it, eh?"

"Yes."

"How did he happen to tell the circumstance at all?"

"He told it because I asked him about possible enemies of Ransom's."

"With the idea that one or more enemies might have sprung out of that affair?"

"Yes."

"Do you think so, chief?"

"I think it is possible."

"Why did *you* mention that crime *first*, in telling me about the present mystery?"

"Merely because I believe that one is associated with the other, although I have no idea how they are related or why."

"Still I don't see exactly why you should have made such a point of it in telling me about the disappearances."

"It was not my intention, and I did not wish to create the impression that I made a point of the murder of ten years ago," replied the detective, smiling. "I merely told it to you as an item of interest which you should know about. That is all."

"I suppose you have a verbal description of Ransom and the two girls?"

"Yes. But that snap-shot of Ransom is said to be a good picture. He is forty-nine or fifty years old; smooth-face, keen gray eyes, bald save for a fringe of iron-gray hair, thin lips, firm chin, straight nose, good teeth, five feet ten in height, deep-chested, strongly put together, good-looking, and has the air of a successful man. He appeared in Texas, on the ranch I have mentioned, fifteen years ago, with the two moth-

erless girls; they were seven and five years old respectively. Within a year after the killing of Heaton, he turned the ranch over to a company and moved to Dallas. The fact that Pauline is not his own daughter was not revealed to any person until he told his lawyer about it in making his will. He said at the time that Pauline did not know the truth herself, and that he should not tell her—at least, he had no present intention of doing so."

"Why did he tell the lawyer about it?"

"Because he preferred to recite the fact in the will. He did not intend that Pauline should know that she was not his daughter until after his death."

"She is now twenty-two and the other one, Irma, is twenty."

"Yes."

"Where does Congdon enter into the affair?"

"He was formerly a cowboy on the ranch. He was smart, and studied law. When Ransom went to Dallas to live, Congdon went to Kansas City to finish his studies, and has remained there ever since."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Is there any apparent reason for his disappearance?"

"None. He left a balance of nearly two hundred dollars at his bank; his affairs were straight; he was in the midst of the trial of a case when he disappeared; he merely left the court-room ostensibly to go to his dinner, and has not been seen since then."

"We are not asked to find him, are we?"

"No."

"Has any effort been made to find him?"

"Not that I am aware of. He was known to be an orphan, without known relatives."

"Lawyer King told you about him—why?"

"Merely because it was a point which he believed would interest me."

"It interests me mightily, chief. I believe that his disappearance is connected with the others."

"Possibly it is."

"If he had disappeared forty-eight hours *earlier* than the other, he would have had time to travel here from Kansas City before——"

"Yes; but he did not."

"Well, then, one of the parties here—Ransom or one of the girls—had time to get to him there before *he* jumped the town; before he vanished."

"That is true enough."

"Who is our client? King? Or is there some one behind him in the investigation?"

"King is acting for several men who are interested to know if Ransom is alive or dead. It is a business matter with them. Even the two young women don't enter into the matter."

"It is, then, merely a question of dollars and cents with those clients?"

"Yes."

"Didn't Ransom have any relatives who are ready to claim the property if he is dead?"

"Apparently not. Besides, there is not much property in sight to claim beyond his interest in several ranches and mines. All that amounts to less than a hundred thousand. King says he was worth more than that, but that Ransom kept his affairs to himself so thoroughly that he knows as little about him as I do, or you do. He had two bank-accounts in Dallas, but both were drawn down to trivial amounts."

"Did he have much money with him when he came to New York?"

"King doesn't know."

"It strikes me that what King does not know is phenomenal, chief."

"Yes."

"You haven't described the young women to me yet."

"Pauline is tall and dark, rather fine-looking—a sort of Juno in appearance, I take it. Irma is slight and fair, rather pretty, winsome, and girlish."

"You hit the nail pretty nearly on the head when you said it was a case without a clue," remarked Patsy, after a pause. "There doesn't seem to be any head or tail to it, chief."

"No."

"Three persons, a father and two daughters, disappeared from their boarding-house in New York six months ago. Two days later a man in Kansas City, who was engaged to be married to one of the girls, also disappeared. The New York incident seems to have no connection with the one in Kansas City save by inference. It doesn't seem to me to be any case at all, as it stands. There is no apparent reason for any of the disappearances. We are brought into the case six months after it happened."

"Well, Patsy"—Nick Carter left his chair and crossed to the window—"as I said in the beginning, I leave the case in your hands. Do what you can with it. You can go to the address of Mrs. Parsons, the boarding-house keeper, and find out what she knows. I have not been there, but it is possible that you may pick up some sort of a clue from her."

"I doubt it. You say that some effort has been made to find Ransom and his daughters. We might as well refer to both girls as his daughters."

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you know who made that effort?"

"Two local detectives who were sent on from Dallas; that is all I know."

"Well, whoever they were, it is safe to say that they have been through any baggage that Ransom left behind him. I suppose baggage *was* left behind; eh?"

"They took nothing away with them."

"Then there were trunks and satchels, and all that; eh?"

"Yes."

"Where are they now?"

"Everything was left at the house of Mrs. Parsons, King tells me. He says that he paid the small amount due to the landlady for board and arranged with her

to store the baggage, thinking that Ransom might sooner or later send for it."

"I wonder why he thought that?"

"He says he didn't know what else to think, save that Ransom had gone away suddenly somewhere, taking his daughters with him, and that he intended to send for his things later on. It is a logical conclusion."

"Oh, yes." Patsy crossed the room and took up his hat.

"Where are you going?" asked the detective.

"I am going to make a call upon Mrs. Parsons. I can get there by eight o'clock."

"Easily."

"I feel that I would like to talk with her before I see King in the morning."

"Not a bad idea. I won't be here when you return."

"Are you going away to-night? I didn't know that."

"Yes."

"You haven't told me where."

The detective smiled, hesitated a moment, then replied:

"The fact is, Patsy, there is a strange coincidence in this matter which perhaps explains why I referred to that ten-years-old crime in the way I did. The fact is, I have been asked to solve the mystery of the disappearance, ten years ago, of one Henry Hastings, whose middle name was Heaton. See?"

"I should say I do see. So! *That* is where you are going, eh?"

"Yes."

"Don't you want to tell me anything about the case?"

"There isn't anything to tell, Patsy, save that I have been asked to find out what became of Mr. Hastings. He left New York for St. Louis ten years ago, and has never been heard from since. His middle name was Heaton. A man named Henry Heaton was shot from behind, in Texas, soon after he left here. The coincidences of name, time, circumstance, and of the fact that the two cases should be given to me the same day and come from entirely different sources, have interested me. Now you know it all."

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN FROM KANSAS CITY.

Patsy wished that there had been time for him to ask Nick Carter more about the Hastings case, but he soon arrived at the house of Mrs. Parsons and speedily forgot all about it, so strong was his interest in the matter in hand.

"I have called, Mrs. Parsons," he told the woman, "to find out all you can tell me about the strange disappearance from your house, six months ago, of Mr. Ransom and his two daughters, and to examine the baggage they left behind them."

"I can't tell you a thing about it more than I have already told the others who have asked," she replied. "The baggage is still here. I have it stored in a small room on the top floor."

"Thank you. I will look that over later, and in your presence, if you please. At present, will you tell me something about the gentleman and the young ladies?"

"I'll willingly tell you all I know, sir, but it isn't much."

"How long had they been here, at the time of their disappearance?"

"Not quite two weeks. They had paid for the first week; there were four days on the second week when they disappeared."

"Exactly. You were paid for that?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Who paid you?"

"A gentleman—lawyer, he said he was—named King; from Texas."

"He also paid you for storing the baggage, against the possible return of Mr. Ransom?"

"Yes; I told him I would keep the things a year for ten dollars. After that he must take them away."

"What day of the week was it when Mr. Ransom and his daughters went away and did not return?"

"Wednesday; about ten in the morning."

"Did they go out together?"

"Yes. They always did that, while they were here. They invariably left the house together and returned in the same manner. They were always here for breakfast and dinner; never once for luncheon."

"Did you see them before they went away that particular morning?"

"I was on the front steps when they went out."

"What was said between you at the time?"

"Nothing more than the things one usually says under such circumstances."

"Please tell me what they were."

"Why, I said something about it's being a beautiful morning and that they would have a fine day for their shopping. The smaller of the two girls—the one that was going to be married and was buying her things—replied to me."

"What did she say?"

"That she was almost too tired to be interested in the shopping. She had no idea that it was such hard work to buy things. I told her that she ought to have her young man here to help her around, and she replied that she was expecting him. That was all, I believe."

"Oh; she was expecting Mr. Congdon, was she?"

"Yes. It was too bad, too, that she wasn't here when he came."

"When he *came?* Did he come here?"

"Yes."

"Indeed. When was that?"

"Sunday morning."

"The following Sunday, of course?"

"Yes."

"How do you know that he was Mr. Congdon—Miss Irma's fiancé?"

"He told me so."

"Do you know where he came from?"

"Kansas City, I suppose. That was where he lived. I had been told that."

"You are giving me interesting information. Tell me more about it. Your guests had been absent nearly four days when he appeared. You must have been worried about them by that time, Mrs. Parsons."

"Worried! I was that worried I couldn't sleep. I happened to go to the door myself when the young man came, and a right handsome fellow he was, too. He stepped right inside the door, as if he was expecting to find his friends here, and asked for Miss Irma Ransom at once. I told him then about their being among the missing, and he seemed dazed. I told him just how they had gone out Wednesday morning, expecting to be back to dinner, and to go to the theater that night and——"

"Wait a moment. You have said nothing about the theater until now."

"No."

"How do you know that they expected to go to the theater that night?"

"Miss Irma told me about it the evening before."

"Did they have the tickets?"

"Yes. I saw them."

"Do you remember what theater it was?"

"Belasco's. 'The Girl of the Golden West.'"

"I don't suppose you paid any attention to where their seats were located, did you?"

"Indeed I did. I am always interested in theater-tickets. I didn't get much chance to go myself, but I had seen that play and liked it, and so I asked where their seats were. They were in the seventh row, on the aisle."

"For the same night? Wednesday night?"

"Yes. But you needn't trouble yourself to make inquiries about them at the theater, because I know they didn't use the tickets."

"How do you know that?"

"I found the tickets in one of their rooms, on the mantel, the next day."

"Oh; you did. Now, tell me more about Mr. Congdon. How did he take the information that his fiancée had disappeared?"

"Why, he took it all right. He seemed a bit dazed at first, but then he laughed and said he supposed they had gone somewhere with friends, and had forgotten to send word to me, or had sent it, and it had not been delivered. He asked permission to leave a message, and went into the back parlor to write it; but thought better of it, and went away without doing so. He said he'd call again—but he didn't."

"He did not?"

"No. I haven't seen a sign of him since then. Not one."

"You have a telephone in the house, haven't you?"

"Certainly."

"Didn't he ever telephone to you?"

"No. I haven't seen him nor heard a word from him or about him since that morning."

"There have been other inquiries for Mr. Ransom and his daughters, haven't there?"

"Two detectives came here from Texas, about a month later. That's all."

"Nothing else?"

"No. I told them what I have told you. They went away, and I haven't seen them since."

"It is rather odd that Mr. King has not been here to inquire. I understood you to say that he paid the balance of the bill and for the storage and——"

"Oh, I forgot all about him. But, you see, he didn't really make any inquiries about them. He laughed about it. He said that Mr. Ransom was always doing queer things and—well, the lawyer thought they'd all come back soon. He didn't take it seriously at all."

"Tell me something about the young ladies, Mrs. Parsons."

"What about them?"

"Well, did either of them appear to be troubled about something? Was there anything in the manner of either of them to indicate that she was in distress of mind, or anything of that kind? Was any trouble mentioned?"

"No, sir. Not a thing. The little one—Miss Irma; the one that was to be married—was as happy as a lark all the time. She went about the house singing like one. She was one of the sort that has a pleasant word for everybody, and who can't speak without smiling. She was a little love."

"And the other? Miss Pauline?"

"Well, she was different; but she certainly was beautiful."

"How was she different?"

"Oh, in every way. Her eyes always burned into me when she looked at me. She was tall and dark and solemn. She could smile, too, but she never laughed; that is, not like other people laugh. Even her father acted as if he was a little bit afraid of her. Irma didn't, though. She just joked and laughed at her older sister. But, all the same, the two girls were no more alike than if they were not related at all."

"You liked Irma better than you did Pauline?"

"Yes. So would anybody who had sense."

"Did you dislike Pauline?"

"No. I had no reason to do that. She was always perfectly polite and considerate. She never raised her voice above a certain key. She was always calm and self-contained. But Irma would romp up the stairs and down again, singing both ways. I *do* hope that nothing has happened to that girl."

"Do you know where they intended to make their purchases that day? That Wednesday?"

"Bless you, no. They were going to Lord & Tay-

lor's, to Macy's, to Altman's, and I don't know where else."

"Did they leave here in a carriage?"

"No; they walked."

"They did not mention specifically any place to which they were going?"

"No."

"How did you like the father of the girls?"

"Very much indeed—what little I saw of him. He was a very silent man. I'll tell you one thing about him: He wasn't the sort of man that you'd think could disappear in the manner he did, unless he *meant* to disappear."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I mean that he looked as if he was well able to take care of himself under all circumstances. Of course any man may be drugged, or hit on the head from behind, or something like that; but men aren't drugged or hit on the head in broad daylight, when two young women are with them; not as a rule. I mean that he impressed me as the kind of a man who would fight, and fight hard, if he had occasion to do so."

"I understand you. Did he, too, seem happy, while they were here?"

"Oh, yes. I could hear him joking with his daughters often."

"They had plenty of money?"

"Lots of it. I set them down as rich folks, and I can come pretty near telling."

"I suppose so. You have had experience."

"Indeed I have. I know the real thing from the false. You don't run a boarding-house in New York twenty years without learning a few things."

"Certainly not. It is precisely for that reason that I wished to talk with you, Mrs. Parsons; and I haven't quite finished yet."

"Very well, sir. I'll help you all I can, gladly."

CHAPTER IV.

SMELLING OUT A PLOT.

"Mrs. Parsons," said Patsy, "as you say you have had long experience in keeping a boarding-house in New York City. By so doing you have had opportunity to study human nature very thoroughly, and I have no doubt that you have learned to read it very correctly."

"I think so, sir."

"You have also just stated that you would be glad to give me any assistance in your power in clearing up the mystery of the disappearance of these three people from your house."

"I certainly will be glad to do so if I can."

"Thank you. Now, let us see if we can get at it in the proper way."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you, Mrs. Parsons, to try to put yourself in my place for a moment."

"I don't think I understand what you mean by that, Mr. Garvan."

"Well, imagine yourself a detective, try to recall everything to your mind that will help you to understand any significant act or word done or said by Mr. Ransom and his daughters while they were in your house."

"Yes."

"And see if you cannot deduct from them an explanation which will be at least partially satisfactory to yourself to account for their strange disappearance."

The woman shook her head dejectedly.

"I don't think I can do that, Mr. Garvan," she said.

"Try," insisted Patsy.

"I haven't any idea about it at all, sir," she assured him.

"But, Mrs. Parsons, you have formed some sort of an opinion. A thing like this could not have happened in this house without you doing so. Mr. Ransom and his two daughters were staying with you. They went out as usual one Wednesday morning about ten o'clock and have never returned. You have heard nothing of them since that time. Several people have been here to inquire, but you have been able to tell them nothing more than you have told me and perhaps not so much. Now, Mrs. Parsons, it is my belief that all the time you have had some definite idea in your own mind as to what has become of these people. It may not be clearly enough expressed even to yourself to have formed a positive opinion, but nevertheless I am sure that some idea about it has suggested itself to you. I want you to tell me what that idea is."

The woman looked greatly troubled. She dropped her eyes and bit her lips and seemed considerably perplexed during the silence which followed, and which lasted several moments. But while it lasted, Patsy waited patiently, knowing that presently she would speak and believing that she would offer some suggestion that might be worth listening to.

"I don't know what to say to you, Mr. Garvan," she told him at last. "It is quite true as you have said, that I have an idea about the matter, but it is so incomplete and is based upon such flimsy and unpretentious reasons that I don't think I have any right to talk about it."

"Nevertheless," said Patsy, "it is exactly what I want to hear from you."

"Well, sir, If you'll promise not to take me seriously, I'll try."

"Understand me, Mrs. Parsons, I haven't asked the question of you with any idea that it will bring about a solution of the problem, but I have great faith in a woman's perception, in women's intuition, and, therefore, since you have had an opportunity, which has not been given to me, to know these three persons, I would like to know what half-formed idea you have evolved about the present circumstances."

Again she hesitated, and a deep flush crept to her

face as she did so; but presently she exclaimed as if with sudden resolution:

"I don't think it's right for me to do it, sir. You see I haven't anything at all really upon which to base what I must say, if I say anything."

"All the more reason for telling it to me," replied Patsy, smiling.

"Well, then, if you will have it, here it is: I believe that the older of the two girls is in some manner responsible for the present mystery."

Patsy could not refrain from giving expression to the surprise he felt at this statement, for it must be admitted that no such idea had occurred to him.

"Why do you say that, Mrs. Parsons?"

"That's just the point," she cried out, half-angrily. "You ask me why I say it when I do not in the least know why I do say it. I have no reason at all for saying it. I told you that in the beginning."

"Oh, yes," he said, smiling at her, "or otherwise you would not have said it. You have already told me that you did not like Pauline and did like Irma very much indeed. Is that the reason?"

"No, sir, I don't think it is the reason."

"Very well, give me another one."

"I didn't like the way she looked at her sister and her father."

"How was that?"

"Well, I caught certain glances of her eyes when she didn't know that I saw her and when it was certain that neither her father nor Irma saw her, that I didn't like. There was something baleful about it. I have heard of basilisk glances, and although I don't in the least know what they are, I should think that Pauline's expression was just that sort of thing if it means anything dreadful."

Patsy laughed.

"Well? What else?" he asked.

"Really, Mr. Garvan, there isn't anything else at all. It is just my rooted dislike of Pauline Ransom. I didn't like her. I always felt half-afraid of her. She had big round black eyes that always looked as if they were on fire somewhere in their depths so that you could feel the heat and glow of them without seeing it. I used to think that maybe she wasn't his daughter at all."

"Isn't it rather surprising that you should think anything like that?" asked the young detective, realizing that when he asked the question that this woman's intuitive perceptions had indeed delved deeper than he thought.

"Of course it is," she admitted.

"Was she so strikingly unlike her father and sister?" asked Patsy.

"She was not one bit like either of them in the smallest particular," was the emphatic reply.

"How about the other two? Were they alike?"

"Yes, Irma was very much like her father in many ways. She even looked like him in a very feminine and sprightly sort of way. I used to think sometimes that Pauline had different blood in her veins entirely. I have heard that men in the Far West sometimes marry Indian squaws, and really, Mr. Garvan, there were times when I would not have been in the least surprised if some one had told me that Pauline was half-Indian."

"But," exclaimed Patsy, smiling, "you have told me that Pauline was very beautiful."

"So she was, and is—if she is alive."

"To return to the original question, Mrs. Parsons, what is your idea as to what has become of those three people?"

"Do you want it flat-footed, Mr. Garvan?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, I think that John Y. Ransom and his daughter Irma have been somehow spirited away by, and have perhaps met with foul play through, the other daughter, Pauline, doubtless assisted by another person or persons of whom we have never heard, all of whom have been moved to commit the acts for reasons that we do not know and cannot guess. That, Mr. Garvan, is my idea, and I haven't the least reason in the world for harboring it outside of my dislike for Pauline Ransom."

Patsy was silent for a moment before he replied to this statement, and then he asked:

"Have you any other reasons for that opinion than those you have given me?"

"Not one."

"Did you ever see any act on the part of Pauline to suggest to you that there might be any plotting or planning afoot with her?"

"No, sir; no more than was suggested by her general manner."

"Well, what was her general manner?"

"Sly."

"Now, Mrs. Parsons, let us return for a moment to that Sunday morning when Mr. Congdon appeared here at your door."

"Yes, sir."

"Were you surprised to see him?"

"Not at all, for I didn't in the least know who he was."

"After he told you his name, were you surprised that he was here?"

"No."

"While they were here at your house, did they always go out together and return together?"

"Except on one occasion they did."

"When was that?"

"It was the Sunday evening before they disappeared."

"Tell me about it."

"Mr. Ransom and Irma went to church together that evening and Pauline remained in her room. I also attended church—the Marble Collegiate, which is not far from here."

"Did they receive any callers while they were here at your house?"

"A gentleman called to see Pauline that night to

which I have just referred when her father and sister were at church."

"How do you know this if you were also absent?"

"One of my servants told me. I asked when I returned if any one had been here. The reply was that a gentleman had called upon Miss Pauline Ransom, and it struck me as peculiar because of the fact that he had asked for her by name as if he already knew that she would be here alone to receive him—that her father and sister would be at church."

"Well," said Patsy, "of course when he asked for Pauline, he sent up his name and the servant would remember it."

"But that is just what he didn't do," replied the woman. "He told the servant to tell Miss Pauline Ransom that the gentleman she was expecting was in the parlor."

"He was gone before you returned from church?"

"Apparently. I did not see him."

"Have you ever asked the servant who admitted him to describe his appearance to you?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Well?"

"Right here again, Mr. Garvan, I hesitate to give you my conclusions."

"Why so?"

"Because I have nothing tangible upon which to base them."

"Nevertheless I would like to hear what they are."

"Well, sir, from the description of the man furnished me by my servant, which meant nothing to me at the time it was given, I decided that he was the same person who called here the next Sunday morning and announced himself as Mr. Congdon."

Patsy smiled reassuringly and replied:

"It is not likely that it was Mr. Congdon who was here the preceding Sunday evening, because I happen to know that he was in Kansas City and in court on Friday of that week."

"Well, sir, even so he could have gone back to Kansas City and have been there on Friday."

Patsy shook his head with emphasis.

"I don't believe it was Irma Ransom's fiancé who called upon Pauline that Sunday evening you were at church. I will admit to you now, Mrs. Parsons, that you give me quite a surprise when you say that he was here the Sunday morning following their disappearance, but it doesn't seem likely that he would come here especially to see Pauline, have returned to Kansas City and then come back again the following Sunday."

"No, sir. It doesn't seem likely. I'll admit that, but I'll tell you quite frankly that I took quite as strong a prejudice against him when he came here that Sunday morning after the disappearance as I had all along felt for Pauline. I didn't like the way he acted when I told him about his friends. He didn't take it enough to heart. He impressed me as being a man who is not sincere, and I was not at all surprised when he did not come back afterward."

"So," said Patsy, "if we boil down all you have said about the matter and put your several opinions into plain words we find that your belief is that James Congdon has plotted with Pauline Ransom to get rid of Irma and her father."

"I couldn't put it as plainly as that if I tried, Mr. Garvan, but that is exactly as I believe," said the woman, snapping her jaws together with conviction.

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER COINCIDENCE.

Patsy spent the next half-hour or more in examining thoroughly the baggage that had been left at the house by John Y. Ransom and his daughters, but although he went through it with great attention to detail, he discovered absolutely nothing that would aid him in his search.

One thing that struck him as curious about it was that nowhere did he find any letter or message to Irma Ransom from her lover and intended husband in Kansas City.

Mrs. Parsons, when questioned on the subject, stated that she knew of her own knowledge that several letters had arrived at the house which bore the Kansas City post-mark and the conclusion was obvious either that the young lady had destroyed these letters when read or that she had carried them with her when she left the house that day of her disappearance.

Neither explanation seemed likely, however. A young lady of Irma's age and characteristics is not likely to destroy letters received from her lover, nor is it supposeable that she would carry a bulky package around with her on a shopping tour of the city.

There were some other letters among her effects, but there was not one there which afforded Patsy any information whatever upon the points that interested him.

There was also a dearth of letters, documents and the like among the effects of Mr. Ransom, and Patsy also regarded this as surprising inasmuch as the man was known to be a person of affairs, and because Mrs. Parsons stated positively that many letters and telegrams had been received by him at the house while he was there.

Again there was this same absence of documentary evidence among Pauline's things. It looked as if some person or persons had carefully gone through the baggage of all three of the missing persons with a view to removing everything of the kind.

It occurred to Patsy that the detectives from Texas might have taken such things away with them, but on this point Mrs. Parsons reassured him, saying that they had taken nothing away and that they had found no letters of any kind there.

So far as the other things were concerned they made up a list of what would ordinarily be found in such

a collection of baggage. Each of the young women had a trunk well stocked with wearing apparel and articles of feminine adornment; Mr. Ransom had brought with him two fat suit cases and that was all. There was nothing to afford Patsy any clue whatever.

He told Mrs. Parsons that he would call upon her again, probably within a few days, and at half-past nine left the house and walked through the next street to Fifth Avenue, and after following down that thoroughfare a short distance turned through to Broadway, where presently he came to a stop before the entrance of one of the theaters and stood for a moment examining the framed photographs that were displayed in the foyer.

Acting upon an impulse he went to the box-office and said to the treasurer:

"If you have a single seat that is a good one, I will take it, and see the rest of the show."

There was a ticket lying on the board directly in front of the treasurer, and he pushed it forward to Patsy, saying as he did so:

"Here is one that was returned just as the curtain was going up on the first act. I took it back because I thought I could sell it again, but I did not. It's a good seat."

Patsy waited inside the theater until the end of the act that was then on, but as soon as the curtain was dropped he had himself shown to his seat and prepared himself to enjoy what remained of the performance.

Contrary to his custom, he gave very little attention to the persons next to him on either side. His mind was still busily employed upon the case he was investigating, and he was going over in his recollections each article of the baggage he had examined at Mrs. Parson's house.

Presently, however, at about the middle of the next act, an impatient movement by the person seated next to him on the right made him turn his head, and instantly he was interested, although he could not have told why, in the man to whom his attention had been drawn.

The face was a rugged one and strong, save for the too evident marks of dissipation that were stamped upon it and the watery expression of the eyes.

Patsy could not have told why it was so, but some inner sense instantly brought to his mind the name of James Congdon, of Kansas City, and he felt an uncanny presentiment that the man next to him was somehow associated with the young lawyer or perhaps was the man himself. It will be remembered that Patsy had been given no description of Congdon more than the one supplied by Mrs. Parsons, which was nothing, and he admitted to himself the folly of any such thought as the one that had occurred to him. Nevertheless he was so impressed with the idea that he found himself recurring to it over and over again each time that he looked upon his right-hand neighbor, who left his seat and went outside the moment the curtain dropped again. Patsy was determined that when the man returned he would somehow engage him in conversation, but he was granted no opportunity to carry out the design, for the reason that the man did not return at all, and Patsy had the two seats to himself during the remainder of the play.

When the curtain dropped on the last act, the young detective got upon his feet and, having raised the two seats to get them out of the way, stood there waiting until the first rush for the exits was past, and while doing so he happened to look down and discovered a soiled envelope lying upon the floor directly underneath the seat that had been occupied by the stranger who had interested him.

The envelope had the appearance of having been carried in the pocket a considerable time. Patsy thought, from the looks of it, that it had been carried in a hip pocket, and next to and against a memorandum-book or purse bound in red leather, for the envelope showed the red stains of it. It had been opened and there was no writing upon it, and Patsy thought at first that it was empty. Nevertheless he looked inside and discovered that it contained a slip of paper, which exactly fitted into it without being folded.

He pulled the paper from the envelope and gave a start of amazement when he read, plainly written thereon, the address of Mrs. Parson's boarding-house in Madison Avenue.

That was all there was of it. There was no name and no memorandum of any kind connected with it; merely the number and the name of the avenue.

A boarding-house in one sense at least is almost as public as a hotel. It was not strange that a person should be at that theater with the address of that particular boarding-house in his pocket. Patsy had the address in his own pocket, and it was not unlikely that several other persons in the same theater might also have it, since Mrs. Parsons' house accommodated numerous guests, and each guest doubtless had many acquaintances.

Yet there was the coincidence of the facts to be considered.

Patsy's uncanny impression about the man who had been seated next to him; his association of the unknown stranger with the young lawyer from Kansas City, who had disappeared almost as mysteriously in the Western city as Ransom and his two daughters had done in New York; and then the finding of the address in the soiled and worn envelope on the floor beneath that seat.

The whole case was one of coincidence, as the reader will recall, but here was one which forced Patsy to regret exceedingly that he had not engaged in conversation with the man who had interested him.

But at least he had looked at him intently; so intently that there would be no difficulty in remembering the face if he should see it again.

It was no part of his duty, as described to him by Nick Carter before their parting, to search for James Congdon or to undertake any explanation of the mystery of the young lawyer's disappearance. Congdon's

personality was merely an incident in the affair, but already the name had been twice thrust upon the young detective since he started upon the investigation.

Congdon had appeared in New York City approximately forty hours after his disappearance from Kansas City; that is to say, he had appeared at Mrs. Parsons' boarding house inquiring for the Ransoms—*if* it were really Congdon who had called there and not some person who was making use of the young lawyer's name.

It was this latter idea that found credence in Patsy's mind; but he walked home and went to bed after the performance determined that he would puzzle himself no more about it until after his talk with Basil King at the Hotel Mammoth the following morning.

He found Mr. King awaiting him at half-past ten. The lawyer was a large, florid man, with heavy jaws and small, fierce eyes and suggested the prize-fighter rather than a professional gentleman in his appearance.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Garvan," he said, in a big, genial voice which, however, had a suggestion of oil in it. "You are the assistant whom Nick Carter said he would send to me this morning, and you are to cross-examine me about the Ransom case, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Patsy, dropping upon the chair that was proffered him. "There are some points about the matter which I think a few questions and answers would clear up somewhat."

The big lawyer laughed heartily.

"If you can think of any questions that have not occurred to me, Mr. Garvan, I'll be glad to answer them if I can. The only questions which seem pertinent to the issue are those to which I have been unable to find any answers at all. Now fire away if you're ready."

"In the first place," said Patsy, "I would like to clear the little mystery about the daughters. Mr. Carter told me that the older of the two girls was really no relation of Ransom's at all."

"That is quite correct, according to Ransom's statement to me."

"As I understand it," said Patsy, "he made that statement to you at the time when you were drawing his will."

"Exactly."

"And he told you that you and he were the only persons who knew of the fact that Pauline was not his daughter?"

"Yes."

"If Mr. Carter understood you correctly, it was his intention that even she should not know the truth until after his death."

"That is correct."

"Did Mr. Ransom give you any reasons for acting as he did about it?"

"Not one."

"Did he tell you whose daughter she was or what her right name was?"

"No."

"So I am to understand that her name appears in the will as Pauline Ransom?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Ransom leave any directions with you for telling the girl who she really was in the event of his death?"

"Not one. Not a line."

"Then, although in the will he admitted she was not his daughter, he gave her no opportunity to find out who she really was?"

"Not one."

"Did he make any remarks about that point?"

"No."

"Did you refer to it at the time?"

The lawyer threw back his head and laughed heartily, finally exclaiming:

"By Jove, Garvan, you ought to be a lawyer instead of a detective. You would make a dandy cross-examiner. Yes, I did make a remark on that point at the time of the drawing of the will. I said something about it being a shame to tell the girl that she was not his daughter unless he also informed her who she really was."

"Good!" exclaimed Patsy. "That is what I am getting at. Now, what did Mr. Ransom say in reply to that remark of yours?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders and looked at the ceiling for a moment with a grim tightening of his massive jaws as he did so; and then he snapped out:

"I'll quote his reply in his exact words. He said: 'If you attend to your own business, King, you'll be kept pretty busy,' and so, Mr. Garvan, I did attend to it, and I didn't ask any more questions."

"Did you form any conclusions from that reply of his?"

"One."

"What was it?"

"That if I didn't do as I was told without asking any questions, Ransom would get another lawyer."

"That isn't what I meant at all," said Patsy.

"Oh, I know that very well, Mr. Garvan, but it's the only conclusion I've formed; that is what I want you to understand."

"Didn't it occur to you, Mr. King, as being quite possible that Pauline Ransom would herself know who she was the moment she was told that she was not John Y. Ransom's daughter?"

"Well, I'll admit that I got some such an idea."

"You know both the young ladies, I suppose?"

"I have known them by sight for several years, yes."

"Do you——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Garvan, before you proceed with that question. I want to tell you something. You are about to ask me if I believe that Pauline Ransom has any idea herself that she is not John Y. Ransom's daughter. Now, you must remember that I'm a lawyer and I object to that question on the

ground that it isn't the best evidence, and that I wouldn't have even hearsay to support me in any statement that I would make about it. If I weren't a lawyer, I should say that Miss Pauline Ransom would need only to look in the glass at her own reflection and then to look upon the faces of John Y. Ransom and his daughter Irma to know mighty well that she didn't belong to the same breed. Now, that is all that I've got to say about it or will say about it. I don't know of my own knowledge anything about the matter at all, save what John Y. told me. He said that Pauline did *not* know that she was other than his daughter, and I have reason to believe that he knew what he was talking about."

"I'll leave that subject," said Patsy, "and come to another one."

"Very well."

"Do you know of any reason, or can you imagine one why John Y. Ransom would have wished to disappear?"

"No, I do not, and I cannot imagine one."

"Mr. Carter told me that he was tried for murder once down in Texas."

"That's quite true. I told Mr. Carter about it myself."

"He was acquitted?"

"Yes, he established an alibi."

"Was it entirely satisfactory?"

"It satisfied the jury, and I reckon that was enough."

"Aren't there persons in Texas that still have an idea that he was guilty?"

"I suppose there are."

"Have you ever heard of any friends of the dead man who might be mixed up——"

"You can stop right there, Mr. Garvan. I have never heard that the dead man had any friends at all."

"Mr. King, you were Ransom's lawyer, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"How long have you acted in that capacity for him?"

"Ten years."

"Did you defend him at the time of that murder trial?"

"I did."

"Then, Mr. King, I should say that it is quite likely that you knew John Y. Ransom as intimately as any other man knew him."

"I think I did."

"Then haven't you some idea in your own mind by which you would account for this strange disappearance of Ransom and his daughters?"

"Mr. Garvan, I will answer you as solemnly as you have asked the question. It is now six months since Ransom and the two girls disappeared. During that time I have asked myself that same question over and over again, and always I am compelled to give the same answer to it, which is, I have not a single one."

CHAPTER VI.

AN OMINOUS MOMENT.

Patsy left his chair and crossed the room. He stood at the window for a moment, then turned abruptly to the lawyer and said:

"Mr. King, I wonder just how deeply interested you are in this effort to find out what has become of John Y. Ransom and the two young women?"

It was an impertinent remark to make. It was almost insulting in tone, but Patsy meant it to be so, for he had leaped at the conclusion that this man was keeping something back; he was, in fact, almost on the point of believing that the lawyer was involved in the very evident conspiracy which had caused four people to disappear mysteriously.

But if Patsy expected the lawyer to be angry, and to express his anger, he was doomed to disappointment.

The man scarcely moved in his chair; he only turned a trifle until his fat and florid face was toward the young detective, and he replied without a change of manner and as if he took the question with entire literalness—save only that there was a decided snap to his eyes when he spoke:

"I am interested, my young friend, in exactly the proportion that I have been and will be paid for my services."

"Personally, then, you don't care?" said Patsy.

"Not a rap."

"Whether John Y. is alive or dead?"

"Only so far as the fact interests my clients—no."

"But he was your client also. If he is alive he is still your client."

"Exactly. If I were a grocer and John Y. were a barrel of sugar in my possession, the relation would be precisely the same. I would be interested in the sugar so long as it remained my property, but not one moment afterward."

"I think I understand you. How about the young ladies?"

"They are mere incidents in the matter. I think, Garvan, that you and I had better understand each other."

"Yes. It would be a good idea."

"Well, John Y. was my client. He disappeared. He took with him certain documents which some other men with whom he was associated in business, would like to know about. His signature is also necessary to them in the conduct of their business—if he is alive. Those men are also my clients. Since Ransom disappeared they have come to me to take charge of the search for him. My interest in the matter is solely to discover if the man is alive or if he is dead; if alive, I wish to impress upon him the necessity of returning; if dead, to prove the fact so that his will may be probated."

"Do you associate his disappearance with the disappearance of Congdon, in Kansas City?"

"I do not associate it with anything at all."

"Your manner suggests that you would be better pleased to find that he is dead, than otherwise."

"I have absolutely no preference in the matter. I am entirely passive."

"I am to suppose, or to assume, that you have exhausted every effort that was available in Texas, where he lived, before you came to Nick Carter, am I not?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me see a copy of the will he made?"

"I have no copy of it. I can tell you some of the provisions of it."

"Well?"

"Ransom divided his property about equally between the two young women, explaining as he did so that although Pauline was not his daughter, she had been reared as such and he so regarded her, and he felt it only an act of justice that she should inherit half of all he possessed. His real estate, which amounts to very little, he directed should be sold and turned into cash; his holdings in the various companies in which he was interested were to be disposed of at par to those companies if they chose to buy, and, if not, then to the highest bidder. The rest of his property, all personal, was left equally to Pauline and Irma, to share and share alike; they were made co-executors without bonds—and there you are. There was nothing stated to tell how much that property amounted to, and when I called his attention to the fact he coolly informed me that it was none of my business; which was true. Now, sir, I made all the financial arrangements regarding this case with Mr. Carter, and so I need not go into that part of it with you."

"No."

"Then all I have to say is this: I waited here to answer any questions which you might wish to ask of me; but I am due back home again and I would like to catch a train that will leave in two hours, so if you have any more questions on your mind I would be obliged to you if you'd get rid of them as soon as convenient."

"I don't think I have any more questions to ask," said Patsy.

"Then I am to assume that our interview is ended?"

"I think so."

"Your chief told me that you would prosecute the case with zeal; I am to suppose that you will do so?"

"Naturally."

"Then there remains nothing whatever to detain me in New York. I suppose you will wire to me any information you receive about the case?"

"No. I will await the return of Mr. Carter and report to him. He will communicate with you."

"Very well."

Patsy left the room with very little ceremony.

He did not like Basil King, and he did not trust him. There was something innately repulsive about the man which affected the young detective strangely.

The heavy jaws, the hard face, and small, glittering eyes, the oily but resonant voice, all proclaimed a character which might be strong indeed, for good or bad, whichever course the man chose to take, and somehow Patsy was convinced while he was in that room that King was the motive power behind the whole affair.

Patsy wished heartily that he could have had that interview with the lawyer before the departure of Nick Carter, and then have talked with his chief again after it. But that was now denied him; and when he thought it over he wondered if Nick had not purposely arranged it so.

He knew that Nick Carter often worked in ways that were utterly dark to others, and he recalled now how little the detective had told him of his own ideas about the case; and that it was only at the last minute, when their interview was about to close, that he had admitted that the ten-years-old-murder, thought to have been committed by Ransom, might have important association with the disappearances.

But how?

Patsy was walking slowly with his eyes cast downward, while he thought, and so arrived at a corner where he wished to cross Fifth Avenue, along which a steady stream of vehicles was moving in either direction.

He paused there and raised his eyes to watch for an opening—and found that he was standing close beside the man who had occupied the next chair to him at the theater the preceding evening, and that the man was apparently as unconscious of his presence now as he had been then.

"Another coincidence," was the thought that flashed through his brain. It had been thus far, a case of coincidences all through, and he was beginning to regard them with something like superstitious interest.

He opened his lips to speak, intending at the instant to address the man as "Mr. Congdon" and see what would come of it; but just as he was about to do so, the man darted forward, having discovered an opening among the passing vehicles, and Patsy followed him without uttering the thought.

The stranger led Patsy across the avenue and through a side street to Fourth Avenue, where he descended to the Subway and boarded a northbound train. Patsy followed him closely.

They left the train at Forty-second Street and entered the Grand Central Station, where the young man whom Patsy was following took up a position near the New York Central ticket windows and stood there closely scrutinizing every person who appeared.

Patsy thought this procedure rather strange, but he was sufficiently interested to remain there and watch, although if he had stopped to analyze his reasons for doing so he could not have found a good one.

But he remembered that uncanny impression he had received at the theater the preceding evening; he recalled the address in the envelope he had found on the floor beneath the seat—and he waited.

Minute after minute passed until the time had

lengthened to an hour; and then to an hour and a half, and all the time the stranger remained like a statue in his place, watching; and Patsy remained in his place watching the stranger.

Hundreds of persons appeared before the ticket office windows, purchased tickets and departed, and the stranger did not appear to see them, so unmoved was he; and yet he never once took his eyes away from the steadily flowing stream of humanity that passed in review before him.

But suddenly Patsy saw him straighten and stiffen; he saw the man's nostrils dilate as the man thrust his chin forward like a person who has discovered what he sought; and, following the direction of his eyes, Patsy discovered Basil King at the end of the line of people who were approaching the ticket window.

Patsy's position was such that he knew he had not been seen by the lawyer, and he moved hastily around until he had taken up a position just behind King; and as he assumed that position the stranger stepped forward and addressed the lawyer from Texas.

"Buy two tickets, King, while you are about it," Patsy heard him say. "I want to talk with you and there won't be time before that train starts."

His eyes bored straight into the lawyer's while he spoke. He stood in a careless attitude, but his hands were in the side pockets of his coat, and Patsy had not a doubt then that each one of them held a gun, which was menacing the Texan.

The latter started somewhat when the stranger addressed him. His little eyes darted sparks of fire at the stranger, and his face turned a shade redder than before. He gave one swift glance toward the pockets wherein the stranger's hands were concealed, and he evidently knew also what the attitude portended.

He shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"All right. Two goes, Jimmy. You won't need to use those guns—here."

"All the same, I'll keep you where I've got you, King. And don't try any monkey business with me, because it won't work."

It is doubtful if any one else than Patsy heard this short conversation, or if it was overheard it was certainly not understood; but Patsy realized that the slightest deviation from what King had been directed to do would bring about a tragedy right then and there. He could see that much in the stranger's eyes.

King evidently realized it also, for he moved on with the line that was approaching the window; and Patsy could see that the flush which had heightened the color of his face did not diminish during that time. He evidently appreciated his danger thoroughly, even though he was in the midst of a crowd in the Grand Central Station in the City of New York.

CHAPTER VII.

A DESPERATE MAN.

Patsy thought rapidly during the short minute that was given him to do so.

He realized now the importance of going on the same train with those two men; but he also knew that if King happened to turn, he would instantly recognize the young detective and would jump at the conclusion that he had been followed.

For a moment he thought of dropping out of the line and keeping out of sight, and then boarding the same train they took, without a ticket.

But he determined that the boldest way was the best, and inasmuch as he was directly behind King where he was least likely to be seen until they were actually at the ticket window, and because the attention of the lawyer was fixed perforce upon the man who had threatened him, Patsy determined to remain where he was and to buy a ticket for the same place.

He pulled his hat down over his eyes, and kept his head bowed so that he would not attract attention to himself, and watched and waited, and followed.

"Two for St. Louis," said King, at the window, and they were quickly stamped and passed out to him; and Patsy half-turned away until King had received his change and left the window, when he also took a ticket for the same place and followed him.

The young detective looked at the clock at the end of the great waiting-room. He saw that only five minutes remained until the train would start, and realized that there would be no time for him to make alterations in his appearance before it left the station; so he kept very much in the background, but still followed the two men as they made their way toward the gate and presently passed through it to the train.

The stranger, whom Patsy now believed without doubt to be James Congdon, still kept his hands in his coat pockets, where Patsy had no doubt they grasped the butts of revolvers; and he walked closely beside the man whom he had compelled to purchase two tickets instead of one; but Patsy could see that they were not talking together. Evidently they were saving whatever they had to say to each other until they should be aboard the train.

The train was a limited one; the tickets were specials which included the Pullman seats; and the two men were so occupied with each other that neither of them looked behind to discover Patsy. One had no knowledge of his existence, doubtless; the other had no reason to suspect that he would be followed, Patsy thought.

As soon as they entered the train, which started almost as soon as they were aboard, Patsy would have gone forward and found a place to make some changes in his appearance; but on putting his hands into his pockets he discovered, much to his chagrin, that he had come away from the house without providing himself for this emergency. He had absolutely nothing at all with him with which to make a change.

For once in his life he realized that he must rely upon his own acuteness to avoid discovery, and he knew that if King even glanced in his direction, he would be instantly recognized.

Often the boldest way is the best way, and this was one of the times.

He followed directly behind the two men into the car, keeping just far enough in the rear so as not to attract attention; and he found that his own seat was directly behind those allotted to King and Congdon—and Congdon took the one that faced the young detective.

Patsy unfolded a newspaper and held it so that his face was shielded. Then he gave his entire attention to overhearing whatever words might pass between the two men.

But they were strangely silent. Neither seemed inclined to talk; at least not at the moment.

Congdon seated himself facing King, and therefore Patsy as well, grimly silent, but with his hands still clutching something inside his pockets. King nonchalantly hung his hat on a hook and donned a light traveling-cap. Neither addressed a word to the other; neither acted as if the other were present at all, or as if they were known to each other.

The train roared through the tunnel and finally around the curve at Spuyten Duyvel with no change in this attitude. King had opened a paper and was reading as if he were utterly alone in the car; Congdon remained grimly silent, with his hands still thrust into his pockets.

The train was passing through Tarrytown before a word was uttered between them, and then Congdon spoke:

"King," he said sharply, "I'll ask you one question right now, and I want an answer. I want the truth, too. You understand?"

"Yes. But before you ask it, I'd like to take my handkerchief from my pocket, Jimmy," was the reply, coolly made.

"Which pocket is it in?"

"My hip pocket, Jimmy."

"Then you'll leave it where it is. You know what will happen if you make a move toward your pockets."

"Sure, Jimmy. But I need a handkerchief badly."

"I've got an extra one. Use that," said Congdon, and he removed one hand from one of his pockets long enough to toss a folded handkerchief to the lawyer, who accepted it, unfolded it, and used it, and dropped it on his knees.

"Now what is that question, Jimmy?" he asked, as coolly as if he were not threatened with death, for that was the attitude, without question.

"We are on a train, King, that is moving along at the rate of about fifty miles an hour. I want to know whether we're getting warmer, or colder; that's all."

"Then you'll have to find out for yourself," was the cool reply. "Nothing doing, Jimmy, in the question and answer line." It is impossible to depict here, the insolence of that remark.

Congdon leaned forward in his chair.

"I've a good mind to shoot you now, where you are," he said, between his teeth.

"Oh, no, you haven't, Jimmy. Don't be heroic. I know that you would shoot quick enough, if I should make a move to do so, but you won't do it otherwise. The train is going too fast for you to leave it, and even if you killed me, it would do you no good. Besides, I know too much that you want to find out. I couldn't tell you if I was dead, eh?" He laughed, and Congdon gritted his teeth.

There was another long silence after that, broken at last by the lawyer, who said:

"I had no idea that you were in New York, Jimmy."

"No; I suppose not. But I haven't been very far away from you since you left Dallas to come here."

"Oh, haven't you? Funny that I didn't spot you."

"I reckon maybe you weren't expecting that I'd be hanging around, King."

The lawyer laughed.

"No," he said, and he chuckled. "Fact is, I thought you were so well cared for that you wouldn't be bothering me. I should have kept a better watch otherwise. There's a flask in my grip, Jimmy, if you care to help yourself."

Congdon smiled for the first time since Patsy had seen him; and he replied:

"I've cut that out, King. You have made use of that weapon for the last time."

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure."

"I've been on your trail, King, for some time, now. I knew you wouldn't think that I could get out of that madhouse where you put me—but I did; and I told the ruffian who passes as a doctor that if I ever heard he had sent word to you, I'd go back there and kill him. I meant every word of it, too, and he knew it."

"Yes, Jimmy," the lawyer yawned. "You're dangerous when you're yourself. I'll admit that. Won't you have a drink?"

"I thought if I trailed you," Congdon went on, as if he had not heard the suggestion, "you would sooner or later take me to the place where you have hidden Irma and her father, or where Pauline is." Patsy pricked up his ears and bent nearer to them. "But last night I thought I'd have it out with you."

"Did you? How was that?"

"I knew that you had taken a ticket to a theater, and I got the seat adjoining."

The lawyer chuckled. "I didn't use my ticket. I turned it back at the box-office, and got my money," he said, with a grin.

"Oh, I know that well enough. A stranger occupied your seat."

"I can't understand your going to the theater to obtain an interview with me when you might have found a chance for one anywhere, if you knew I was in the city. You might have gone to my room at the hotel, or have stopped me anywhere on the street, or have——"

"I had my own reasons, King."

"I suppose so," with a yawn.

"I had a carriage and two men waiting at the door."

"Oh, you did!"

"You would have thought it an accident that we met at the theater. You wouldn't have been very closely on your guard when we came out of the theater, and you'd have been forced into the carriage before you knew what was happening, once you were outside; and then——"

"Well, and then——"

"You'd have told me before morning where to find Irma and her father, or you would never have seen morning, that's all."

The lawyer chuckled again. He seemed outwardly unmoved by the threatening attitude of his enemy.

"Your plans didn't work, did they?" he said.

"No."

"Perhaps you'll tell me why you waited for me at the station."

"I found out that you were going to leave town by this train. I have followed you around long enough. I made up my mind to accompany you. I wonder if you realize what you are up against, King?"

"I'm afraid I don't. You'd better tell me."

"It's this, King. You've got to take me to Irma and her father."

"Oh! Have I?"

"If you don't, I'll kill you."

"When?"

"Just as soon as I am convinced that I can't force you to do what I ask."

"That is rather indefinite, isn't it?"

"Listen to me, King. If Irma and her father are in New York, or near it, you had better take my advice and turn back again at Albany. If they are farther West, you'd better say so, and take me directly to them. I'm not going to let the muzzle of this gun I'm holding in my pocket point an inch away from your heart until you take me to Irma. You are not going to be permitted to put a hand into one of your pockets, unless I'm behind you, until you do that. I shall not let you sleep another wink until you have done it; and at the first sign of a move on your part that doesn't agree with my ideas of what you should do, a bullet goes into that vital spot of yours that you call a heart. Have you got that down, King?"

"You put it rather plainly."

"Do you realize that I mean every word of it?"

"Oh, yes. I know you, Jimmy. When you haven't any booze in your head, you're a man to be reckoned with; but so am I. Don't forget that."

"That is why I am keeping you covered. And, by the way, if you happen to have anything to say to the porter or the conductor or to any third person, tell it to me first and I'll pass it along. It wouldn't be healthy for you to try to talk to others, under the circumstances, King."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN FROM TEXAS WEAKENS.

The entire situation was one replete with tragic possibilities.

That James Congdon was in deadly earnest in everything he said, there could be no sort of doubt; and that King realized the fact was quite as evident.

To look at the two men, if you were passing through the car, you would have thought them merely two gentlemen engaged in a friendly conversation, so quietly did they remain in their seats, so subdued were their voices. It would not have occurred to you that one of them held a revolver in his grasp, with the muzzle aimed at the heart of the other, and that at the least sign of resentment made by King, he would be shot dead by the man who faced him so calmly.

The car was well filled; not one of the other passengers realized how grimly near to them death stalked; not one save Patsy, who had not missed a word or a gesture of this strange scene.

He did not so much dread recognition now, as at first.

He had decided that if King should turn his head and see him to accept the recognition that would follow as a matter of course.

It was evident to Patsy during the silence that followed the last speech of Congdon's, that King was thinking deeply upon the situation in which he found himself involved. While it was apparent that he did not fear Congdon, or, to put it more exactly, was not actually afraid, he was still thoroughly aware of the danger that menaced him, for evidently he knew the character of the man who threatened him, and knew it well enough to realize that Congdon would not hesitate to shoot if he were driven to the point of desperation.

To Patsy, it was evident that the man was plotting while he appeared to be calmly gazing through the window upon the swiftly fleeting view of the river beside them.

If Congdon had recognized Patsy as the man who was seated next to him at the theater the preceding night, he gave no sign of it, and indeed Patsy could not have told that the young lawyer from Kansas City so much as glanced toward him.

It was Congdon who broke the silence that ensued after his declaration.

He said:

"King, no one has ever charged you with being a fool, nor has any one ever called you a coward. You are neither. You are a man of cool judgment who is given to figuring out a situation about as clearly as any man I know. It must be plain to you that as you sit there in this car facing me you are nearer to sudden death than you ever have been before in your life."

King shrugged his shoulders and continued to gaze through the window. He did not reply.

"I am here for just one purpose, King," Congdon went on after a pause, "and I have already stated clearly what that purpose is. You know, and, so far as I am aware, you are alone in knowing it, what has become of Irma Ransom and her father. I want to know where they are, and I demand that you take me to them. I want an answer right now whether you intend to do so or not. The train is approaching Albany. We will be there presently. By the time it comes to a stop you must answer that question or you will not live to hear the wheels of this car turn again. That's all I've got to say until I hear your answer."

King continued silence.

From his manner you would have thought he did not hear the words or the threat they contained, although there was no doubt that he entirely realized their significance as well as the deadly purpose of the man who uttered them.

Patsy glancing from the window realized presently that they were rolling in at the station in Albany, and he began to feel a thrill of portentous excitement as the train slowed down, going at less and less speed until it actually rolled in at the station.

Patsy wondered if King would dare to remain silent; wondered if he possessed the courage and the fortitude to defy this desperate man even to the point of compelling him to use the revolver that was concealed in his coat pocket.

The train continued to go more slowly until it was nearly at a stop, and Patsy saw Congdon's lips tighten and the hand that held the weapon stiffen as the air-brakes brought the mass of wood and iron to a stop, and then, just as the motion ceased, just when another instant would have brought about the threatened tragedy, King remarked as placidly as if his life had not hung by a thread that instant:

"I reckon I'll have to throw up my hands. Jimmy. I'll take you there."

Neither man moved. There was another instant of silence which seemed interminably long to Patsy, and Congdon quietly asked:

"Do we leave the train here, or do we continue with it?"

"We stay aboard, Jimmy."

"In that case, King, you'd better tell me how far we go."

"I took the tickets for St. Louis, didn't I?"

"Yes; is Irma there?"

"She and her father are both in St. Louis. But I say, Jimmy, you haven't asked about Pauline."

"I'll attend to her case, King, after I have finished with you," was the grim reply. "Just now, I have only one purpose and you know what that is."

"Are you going to keep me sitting here like a stoughton-bottle all the way to St. Louis? We'll have to have something to eat presently, and it won't be many hours before the porter will begin to make our berths. What are you going to do about that, Jimmy?"

"I told you in the beginning," was the grim reply, "what I intended to do. We'll adjourn to the smoking-room presently, when we're quite sure that it is vacant, and as for eating and sleeping, you, King, shall do neither one nor the other until you have taken me in the presence of Irma Ransom."

"Good heavens, man, are you going to starve me?"

"Yes."

"But you'll have to starve yourself, too, to do it."

"I can stand it, King, and you must."

"I'll order something brought to me," said the Texan, at which Congdon smiled coldly, and replied:

"You will do nothing of the sort, King. You will bear in mind what I told you a little bit ago. If you have anything to say to the porter or the conductor or any third person on this train, you'll say it to me and I'll pass it on to the next. I mean business, King. You're not going to get a chance to play any of your slick games with me during this trip. If you say St. Louis, we go to St. Louis. If it's San Francisco, or Honolulu, it will be the same, but neither you nor I shall eat or sleep or drink until you have taken me into the presence of Irma Ransom, and I can stand that thing longer than you can, as you know."

The train was rushing on again by this time, and Patsy saw the Texan once more turn his face toward the window. He saw the man moisten his lips with the tip of his tongue, and he realized that King was becoming visibly anxious under the strain he was enduring.

Patsy thought he understood another thing, too. He believed that King had lied when he said that Irma and her father were in St. Louis, and Patsy began now to think that Congdon believed so, too, although he gave no sign of the fact.

The next stop made by that train was at Utica, and during the time consumed between Albany and that point the two men did not exchange another word nor did they alter their relative positions.

King continued to gaze through the window at the flying landscape, while Congdon remained upright in his chair with his hands in the side pockets of his coat, his eyes never wavering from their steady regard of the man in front of him who by now was plainly writhing with anxiety.

To Patsy, who understood it all and who had managed to overhear every word uttered between the two men, the scene was a tragic one indeed; to the other passengers in the car there was nothing whatever apparent save the fact that two men sat facing each other, and that they were strangely uncommunicative save by spells, when they spoke calmly and placidly and in a tone too low for the other passengers to hear.

But when the train approached Utica, King, without turning his head away from the window, announced:

"I think we'd better leave the train here, Jimmy."

"I thought so," was the calm reply.

"I lied to you when I said that they were in St. Louis."

"I knew you did."

"And yet you were willing to go on there with me?"

"Yes, provided you were willing to starve until you took me to Irma."

"You don't mean to question anything that I said, do you, Jimmy?"

"No."

"You intended to go with me anywhere that I pleased to take you, eh?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think you're giving me a pretty good chance to lead you into a trap?"

"That is quite possible, King, but don't forget that if any trap is sprung, you'll be the first dead man in the bunch."

King shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't think you had it in you, Jimmy," he said.

"I fancy you'll meet with more surprises before I'm through with you," was the rejoinder.

"Tell me what you're going to do about Pauline?" asked the Texan.

"I have already told you; I'll attend to her case after I am done with *you*."

King laughed uneasily.

"I suppose you have guessed that she is keeping guard over Irma and her father," he said.

"I have imagined that she isn't very far away from them, wherever they are, King."

The train rolled in at the station and came to a stop, and King arose from his place.

"I suppose I can pick up my bag and carry it off the train," he said, with his insolent smile.

"Yes, and you be very careful, King, to walk directly in front of me. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I won't forget. You'll have to tip the porter, Jimmy, since I can't go into my own pockets."

Congdon did not reply to this remark, and the two men started toward the end of the car to leave it, and thus it was that King suddenly found himself face to face with Patsy.

His recognition of the detective was immediate.

An expression of amazed consternation flashed across his features; then he laughed and, pausing abruptly, he exclaimed, half-turning his head as he did so:

"I think I understand you now, Jimmy!" and he passed on without another glance at Patsy.

Congdon looked the surprise he must have felt, but his eyes did not waver from the steady regard of the man he was watching; he spoke, however, in a low tone, but so that Patsy could hear him distinctly, and said:

"I don't know who you are, and I don't care, but take my advice and don't interfere with this business if you happen to understand what it is."

"All right, Mr. Congdon," said Patsy, "I'll step outside with you on the platform of the station, but in the meantime you may as well know that I am on your side in this little game you are playing, and that I know pretty nearly what it is."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY REVEALED.

Patsy realized exactly how Congdon would feel until the situation was explained to him, and he therefore strode along the platform beside King and in front of the young lawyer from Kansas City until they had withdrawn a sufficient distance from the hurrying throngs of people about them to converse uninterruptedly and without danger of being overheard.

It was Congdon who presently told them to stop, and he added:

"Fold your arms, King; and as for you, sir, I'll ask you to tell me who you are before you turn around. Possibly you have heard enough to know that I am in a desperate mood, and that I am here to carry out what I purpose doing, no matter what stands in the way. You may fold your arms also, and then you can both turn and face me. I've got a gun in each pocket of my coat and they cover both of you. The first move on the part of either of you that isn't in accordance with my desires means that somebody will get hurt, and it won't be I."

King chuckled audibly.

"Now, sir, who and what are you?" as Patsy and the Texan turned to face him; and Patsy replied:

"Mr. Congdon, I am a detective whose services have been engaged by this man King to find out for certain clients of his in Dallas whether John Y. Ransom is alive or dead. I had an interview with him at his hotel this morning at which he told me that it was his intention to return to Texas by the train we just left. When I left the hotel I saw you and followed you. I was with you at the Grand Central Station when you discovered King, and I have been near to both of you ever since. I have heard all that has passed between you, or nearly all of it, and so far as my sympathies are concerned they are entirely on your side of the case."

Congdon's attitude during this short scene had been such as to attract the attention of a policeman who was stationed on the platform, and he had been watching them closely and drawing nearer to them all the time.

He had seen them come to a stop, had noticed Patsy and King pause with their backs to the third man, and only turned about when the latter gave them permission to do so, and, having been trained and raised in the West himself, he was able plainly to read the meaning of the entire scene.

He had observed just such incidents before in his career. An ordinary Eastern man would not have noticed it or read the correct meaning for it, but he understood it.

As Patsy ceased speaking, he interrupted bluntly and demanded:

"What is going on here, gentlemen?"

It was the moment for which King had evidently been waiting and hoping.

A train had pulled in at the station and stopped, and was beginning to move out again just at the instant when the police officer interrupted the scene.

King realized his opportunity, and he acted with that reckless disregard of his own danger which is proverbial among men of his own stamp.

The policeman was nearest to him, and, with motions that were as quickly made as is conceivable, he seized the policeman by the arm, whirled him around, and pushed him so that he collided with Congdon; and at the same instant he leaped away at full speed toward the train that was now rapidly gaining headway in moving out from the station.

It all happened so quickly that even Patsy was dis-

mayed for the instant, and King had leaped upward and seized the hand-rail of one of the passing cars before any of the three men realized exactly what had happened.

Congdon, although knocked backward by the impact of the policeman against him, was the first to recover, and as he staggered to an upright position his right hand flew to a level with his shoulder and the sharp report of the revolver it held startled every person within hearing.

But the policeman, who had once been a cowboy, was still on the alert, although somewhat dazed by the suddenness of the attack.

He saw the motion of Congdon and understood it, and struck outward with his right hand, hitting Congdon's arm and so throwing the muzzle of the weapon into the air and causing the bullet to fly harmlessly over the roof of the car, which was now bearing King rapidly out of the station, still westward bound.

It was not the train upon which he had been a passenger, nor was he provided with tickets, for those were in the possession of Congdon. The man's satchel was also left upon the platform of the station, where King had dropped it when he was compelled to fold his arms.

King had nevertheless made his escape and probably was no less amazed by the fact that he had done so than were the two he left behind him.

When the pistol shot rang through the station many people rushed forward toward the spot, and but for the readiness and the thorough understanding of the policeman who had interfered, Congdon might have been placed under arrest then and there.

But the policeman passed off the affair with a wave of his hand, and, by bidding Congdon and Patsy to move aside with him, convinced the people that everything was all right. However, as soon as they were sufficiently at one side he demanded an explanation of the scene, saying that it was up to him to place both under arrest unless they could satisfy him that it was all right. Patsy took it upon himself to offer the explanation. He spoke up before Congdon could say a word, and said:

"Officer, this gentleman is Mr. James Congdon, a lawyer, of Kansas City. Some little time ago, a young lady to whom he is engaged to be married disappeared quite mysteriously from New York City, in company with her father and another person, and the man who just now escaped on that train knows where they are. Mr. Congdon was born and raised in the West on a ranch, as I imagine you were also, judging from your readiness in this particular matter. Mr. Congdon has had the other man covered by his gun ever since they left the Grand Central Station in New York, and, without finding any fault for your interference, I think he would have him so yet, if you had been less quick to observe the condition of things."

"I guess that's right, too," said the officer. "I'm sorry now that I butted in."

"What train was that that took the Texan out of the station?" asked Patsy.

"It's only a local between here and Syracuse. From there it goes off on the Albany road," was the reply. "Perhaps I can telegraph ahead and have your man intercepted."

"We can't do that," said Patsy, "because there is no charge against him, and we have no warrant for his arrest, but there is one thing that you can do, officer, if you are so inclined and if you desire to assist us."

"I will help you all right if you can only satisfy me that I ought to do so," was the quick reply; but there was evidently still some doubt in the policeman's mind concerning what was proper for him to do under the circumstances.

"I am Patrick Garvan," said Patsy. "I am one of Nick Carter's assistants, and this is my case. I have my credentials with me and will show them if you desire, but what I wish you to do must be done at once, if at all."

"All right, I'll take your word for it. What is it?"

"This: Use the telephone or telegraph, whichever will be quickest, and if you know a man at the next station where that train will stop, give him a description of the man who got away from us and have him board the train and not lose sight of King until we can come up with him."

Without pausing for reply, the officer turned and left them, running as he went, and presently disappeared through one of the doors of the station.

Congdon silently extended his hand toward Patsy.

"How can I thank you, Mr. Garvan?" he asked.

"You can thank me best, Congdon, by explaining to me so much of this mystery as you know."

Congdon hesitated for a moment, then replied:

"If you will first explain to me just how you happened to come into the matter at all. If you will tell me why you occupied the next seat to me at the theater last night and why you followed me to the Grand Central Station this morning, I will do so. Otherwise, I will not say a word."

Patsy explained. He told of the conversation he had had with Nick Carter regarding the case, told

about his call at the house from which the Ransoms had disappeared, related in detail his interview with Mrs. Parsons, described the one that morning with King at the hotel, and also explained every episode connected with his experience at the theater the preceding night; to all of which Congdon listened attentively, occasionally nodding to indicate that he understood, and at the end of it, he again grasped Patsy's hand, gripping it heartily while he exclaimed:

"All right, Mr. Garvan, I understand you now. I saw very plainly also that I should have applied to Nick Carter or to some competent detective to help me in this matter, but the truth is there is so much involved in it, so much mystery and so many cross-purposes that I hesitated to do so, believing that I could carry the matter through unaided. As it is, however, I am very glad to find not only that you are in the case, but that your sympathies are with me in prosecuting it. Now, tell me what it is you would like to know?"

"I want to know everything that you know about it," replied Patsy, "It is six months ago since John Y. Ransom and his two daughters——"

"Wait right there," interrupted Congdon.

"Well?"

"John Y. Ransom has only one daughter. Her name is Irma. Pauline is not his daughter, and is not related to him."

"Well?" said Patsy again.

"Pauline's right name is Hastings. She is the daughter of a man who was shot in the back down in Texas ten years ago, and who was identified under the name of Henry Heaton, but whose right name was Henry Heaton Hastings. John Y. Ransom was accused of his murder, tried for it, and acquitted. The real murderer of Henry Hastings, as I have every reason to believe, but cannot prove, is Basil King, who has just escaped us."

Patsy was amazed at this, but he showed no indication of the fact as he said quietly:

"Go on, please, Mr. Congdon."

"There was an old feud between Mr. Ransom and Henry Hastings. It began when they were young men. I do not know much about it more than that there was a woman in the case who was a Mexican by birth and whom Hastings ultimately married. Pauline was their daughter. I know that Ransom must have been very much in love with that Mexican girl when they were young, and that Hastings won her away from him. I know, and it does not matter just how I know it, that after Ransom had married another woman and Irma was born, he received word from his first love which induced him to go to her. He found her somewhere across the border in Mexico. She was dying, and, in fact, did die in his arms, and she gave Pauline to him, making him swear that he would raise the child as his own and that he would never under any circumstances relinquish Pauline to her father.

"My information ceases at that point, Mr. Garvan, save that Ransom's wife, Irma's mother, died shortly after that, and that Ransom then moved to the ranch near San Antonio near which ten years ago Hastings was killed.

"I worked there as a cowboy at the time, and it was my testimony proving an alibi which saved John Y. Ransom from conviction for Hastings' murder. It was because of that fact that Ransom placed more confidence in me than he did in others, and told me a great part of the history I have related to you."

"Why was the man Hastings there at all?" asked Patsy.

"He was there because he had discovered in some manner that Pauline was alive, and that Ransom had her in charge. He went there to demand her of Ransom. Ransom refused to give her up, denying that she was Hastings' child and insisting that she was his own daughter. That was the quarrel they had which appeared in the testimony. But I happen to know, Mr. Garvan, that Hastings found an opportunity before he saw Ransom on that visit to talk with Pauline and to convince her who she really was."

"I begin to understand you now," said Patsy.

"I think," continued Congdon, "I ought to tell you a little more about the man Hastings. He was originally of good family in the East, but he committed some sort of crime and disappeared in the Southwest, from whence he drifted into Mexico and became an outlaw. He was a bad man through and through, and ultimately deserted his wife and child in the state of Sonora, Mexico. You know what the rest of that part of the story is. Now for one more point."

"Well?" said Patsy.

"This one, Mr. Garvan, is about Pauline."

Patsy nodded.

"From the moment that Pauline had her interview with her real father, she was a changed girl in every particular. Before that she had seemed to love John Y. Ransom as a daughter should love her father, but from that moment, she looked askance at him and it was evident that she doubted him. As I looked on, knowing as much as I did, I realized that Hastings had

succeeded in poisoning her mind against her best friend, who had been more than a father to her all her life. Then came the time when Hastings was killed. I know, Mr. Garvan, that Ransom did not kill him, but I also know that Pauline has always believed he did it. She comes from a vengeful race on her mother's side, and her father was a bad man of vindictive character. She inherits the worst qualities of both. She has hated John Y. Ransom with all the force of her nature ever since that time, and in this matter of the disappearance from the boarding-house in New York of Irma and her father, and of Pauline as well, she and Basil King have been the plotters and have worked in perfect harmony in connection with it. For while King's own incentive in the matter has been to possess himself of John Y. Ransom's wealth, Pauline has sought vengeance for the murder of her father, of which she believes her foster-father guilty."

CHAPTER X.

A COINCIDENCE THAT COUNTED.

It was at that moment that the officer who had befriended them, returned.

"I think I have got that fixed all right," he said. "Your man won't get away from Bad Miller. He is an old chum of mine. We were together on the range in Arizona, years ago. I thought that maybe I could get him on the wire, and if I could, the rest would be as good as done. Bad doesn't let go when he takes hold. And, besides, that ain't all—and then some."

"What do you mean?" asked Congdon.

"Bad Miller knows the gazabo," was the cool reply.

"Knows whom? Who do you mean? King?"

"Yes. He said he used to know such a man in the Southwest, and I said that was him; and he said, 'All right. I've got it in for that fellow anyhow.' With that he shut off."

Congdon turned to Patsy.

"What shall we do?" he asked. He seemed now anxious to leave the entire direction of affairs to the young detective, who willingly accepted the responsibility, and he replied:

"I think, Mr. Congdon, it would be wise for us to remain right here until we get some word from the man who is called Bad Miller."

"That's right," interjected the officer. "Wait here till you get word from Bad. He'll tell you what to do. I'm off duty now, and if you'll come with me I'll show you a place to wait where word will be brought to us as soon as it arrives."

When they were seated together and the policeman had left them for a short time, Patsy said to Congdon:

"That last statement of yours was rather a facer, Congdon. Suppose you tell me more about that part of it."

"What part of it?"

"Well, it isn't quite clear why King and Pauline should be in partnership in this business. Why should she turn against the man who has befriended her all her life, and who has been a father to her, and why should she take up with a man of King's stamp, who, so far as I know, was a comparative stranger to her, and who is almost old enough to be her father?"

"The first part of your question I have already answered. Pauline believes that Ransom killed her father. Don't forget that Hastings saw her and talked with her before he had an interview with Ransom that time when he visited the ranch."

"No."

"There couldn't have been much difficulty in convincing her that he was her father, for they were as alike as a man and a woman can be. More than that, he was always a fascinating man, Ransom told me. He knew how to win her sympathy; and, after all, blood is blood, you know. He *was* her father, and he convinced her of it."

"Yes."

"Well, here is another thing. I haven't a doubt that Hastings arranged it so that Pauline overheard the interview between the two men; perhaps all of their interviews."

"I see."

"Ransom told me that he threatened Hastings—or Heaton, as he was called there. He couldn't use his own name in the States. There was too much against him."

"Where was King all that time?"

"He was there at the ranch; but—and here is a point worth remembering—he was taken sick mighty suddenly when Hastings showed up there, and he didn't let Hastings see him or know that he was there."

"But I don't see——"

"Neither do I. I never did see what you mean, till just now, when that officer told us that his friend, Bad Miller, as he calls him, used to know King in the Southwest."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"I don't know that it has anything to do with it. I only know that King kept out of Hastings' sight all

the while he was at the ranch that time; and I know that when I went to King's room to see him right after Hastings rode away from the ranch, King wasn't there. He had disappeared. He showed up again a little while later—just about the time it would have taken him to follow Hastings away from the place and shoot him in the back."

"So you think that perhaps they had been outlaws together?"

"I haven't a doubt of it. I think that, and I believe that there was an old grudge between them. Probably they had sworn to kill each other on sight. King had given up the outlaw business and become a lawyer; but he knew that Hastings would kill him just the same if he got the chance."

"I understand you now."

"He knew enough of Hastings' business there, to realize that Ransom would be charged with the murder, too. And now, don't you see the rest of the plot?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"To me, it is as simple as the nose on my face."

"Go ahead, Congdon. Tell it all just as you see it. You know the parties in interest. I do not."

"Well, after Hastings was dead, and when King found out that Pauline believed Ransom did the killing, it was easy for him to work upon her sympathies and clinch that belief all the stronger. Hastings being dead, King could pretend to great friendship for him. He could tell the daughter that they had been chums; that they had always loved each other; that he had known her mother; maybe he swore he was present at the marriage. He could paint Ransom as all kinds of a villain——"

"But why should he do that? Ransom was his client."

"Mr. Garvan, John Y. Ransom was once a Texas Ranger. It is pretty clearly established that King was once an outlaw in the Southwest. If he was one, Ransom, as a Ranger, knew it. If King was making the bluff of having reformed, Ransom was and is just the man to help him along, or at least to put nothing in his way. But the very fact that he knew about it, would make King hate him like poison."

"There is no doubt about that."

"Then, there was and is Ransom's money."

"I haven't discovered that he has very much."

"Don't you ever doubt it, Garvan. He is rich. He's a peculiar man. He keeps most of his wealth locked away. King knows where it is, even if he can't get to it. All that was needed to bring forward Ransom's will, was proof of his death."

"But the will, according to King, gives all the property equally to the two girls."

"Exactly; and that is right where I come in."

"Where *you* come in?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I am engaged to be married to Irma. I inherited a disease that is best described by the word booze. I've had it bad, too; but now I've got it beaten to a standstill. It needed just this thing that has happened to bring me to my senses. It never occurred to me that King was doing the plotting until he showed up in Kansas City when I was trying that case, and asked me out to luncheon when we adjourned for recess. He had a bottle with him. I took a drink out of it. It was doctored, and I didn't remember another thing until I woke up on a train bound for St. Louis. Whether he put me there, or I somehow got there myself, I don't know, but I likely did it myself, because I don't see why he should send me East. Anyhow, I stayed on the train. Perhaps he put me on it, thinking that I would go on to New York, as I did, and that when I found that Irma and her father had disappeared, it would make me worse than ever. All that he wanted to do was to prevent my marriage with Irma."

"It looks to me like a very deeply laid plot all around."

"Oh, it isn't so deep. There was Ransom's money locked away where he could get it as soon as he could show the legal right to do so. To get that legal right, he had only to marry Pauline. With me out of the way there would be nobody with the right to protect Irma—but himself, as the husband of Pauline. Mr. Garvan, it is King who has done all the plotting. Pauline has been merely a catspaw of his."

"Your own disappearance from Kansas City was a very simple affair, after all."

"The simplest in the world. I was simply drugged and put aboard a train—or went there. I don't know which. It was the booze, not the disappearance he was counting on."

"But the other disappearances? Texas Rangers are not made away with so easily."

"Well, I don't know, and I can't guess how that was done. We'll have to find John Y. before we know about that."

"I suppose so."

"Here comes that policeman back again. He is a good fellow, Garvan."

"Yes. Let me ask him some questions that occur to me."

"Go ahead. I won't interfere."

"Hello, officer," said Patsy, as the policeman entered. "Any news yet?"

"Not a thing; but that very fact proves that Bad Miller has struck the trail. He won't send any word till he's got something to say."

"Who is Bad Miller; or, rather, who was he, out in the Southwest?"

"Well, Mr. Garvan, that's what you might call a leading question. When I was out in that country we didn't generally bother our heads about a man who *had* been bad if he was all right when we ran up against him."

"I know that. I was only interested to know how he happened to know anything about King, the man he is after now."

"Mr. Garvan, take it from me that if Miller said he knew King, he knew him. Also, that if the two come together, there'll be a mutual recognition party right there. All I can tell you about it is that Miller said over the phone that King used to be in bad company out there."

"Perhaps you also knew the man by sight," suggested Patsy. "Perhaps that is the reason why you interfered when you did, there on the station platform?"

"No; I didn't recognize the man, although I'll admit that there was something about him that seemed familiar. I had a run-in once, at St. John, Arizona, with a hawss-thief named Heaton, and he had a pal with him at the time. I sized this King up as being something like that chap, and——"

Patsy interrupted him.

"You have mentioned a man's name that we have just been talking about," he said quietly. "I refer to Heaton. His right name was Hastings."

"I never heard him called by any other name than Heaton. He was a rustler and a hawss-thief and everything else that was bad. He mostly stayed over the border, where he married a Mexican girl of good family. There was a Texas Ranger named——"

"Wait. Was the Ranger's name Ransom?"

"Sure—and then some! Jack Ransom. He was a fire-eater, too. It was funny that he never 'got' Heaton, for the outlaw stole his sweetheart. I guess he got over it, though, for he married the daughter of a ranchman, near San Joaquin. Say, do you know Jack Ransom?"

"He is the man Mr. Congdon and myself are searching for. He is the man whom this fellow King has spirited away. He and his daughter are the ones who have disappeared."

"Well—say! The world *is* a little bit of a place sometimes, ain't it? Now, what would you think of that? And if I hadn't butted in, you and me would never have known that we were first cousins, so to speak. Wait; there's somebody calling me. I reckon that's a message from Miller. I'll go and find out. It beats all, don't it?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAIL ON THE WATER.

The officer was absent only a few moments when he returned in a great hurry.

"Say," he exclaimed as he entered the door, "I can't go with you, and I'm sorry; but did you ever happen to hear tell of a place that is called Geneva? It's about half-way between Syracuse and Rochester, on the old Auburn road."

"Yes," replied Patsy. "I know very well where it is. Why?"

"Miller is there. So is King. There is a train to Syracuse in about ten minutes, and you will have to change there for the Auburn road. You won't get to Geneva before midnight, or thereabouts."

"Where shall be find Miller when we do get there?"

"Oh, he'll have some one at the train waiting for you."

"But he doesn't know us."

"He told me to tell you that if you'd both carry your hats in your hands when you left the train at Geneva, he'd have no trouble in picking you out; or anybody he might send to meet you, for that matter."

The simplest of all devices. But who else than an ex-cowboy would have thought of it?

Patsy and Congdon lost no time in getting to the train, where they bade the officer who had been of such service to them good-by. His last words to them were: "Let me know how this thing pans out, will you? And if you see Jack Ransom, tell him from me that big Hank Holbrook helped to keep the ball rolling."

It was forty-eight minutes past eleven when Patsy and Congdon stepped from the cars at the superannuated station in Geneva, and, each holding his hat in his hand, they started together along the platform.

But they had not taken a dozen steps before they were accosted by a colored hackman, who came forward briskly and inquired:

"I'm looking for Mister Garvan. Maybe one uh you gentlemen is him?"

"You've hit it dead straight," replied Patsy, replacing his hat on his head. "I am Mr. Garvan, and I am looking for Mr. Miller."

"That's right, boss. Well, he ain't here. He's done gone away."

"Gone away?"

"Yassir."

"Where has he gone?"

"I don't rightly know that, sir. I reckon he didn't know much about it himself. But I will tell you jest what he done told me and maybe that'll fix it straight."

"Very well."

"He says to me, 'Tom, you go to the 'leven-forty-eight train and you'll see two gentlemen holdin' their hats in their hands git off'n it. One uh them'll be Mr. Garvan. When you see him you tell him that me and the other man has gone up the lake and that he is to hire a boat and follow us jest as quick as he knows how, if not quicker.' That's what."

"Gone up the lake! How did they go? Do you know that?"

"No, sir. I don't know nothing about it more than I've told you, sir—'cept that Mr. Miller and another gentleman done went out from here about two hours ago on the *Adelaide.*"

"What is the *Adelaide?*"

"She's a gasoline boat, sir."

"Do you mean that they both went out on the same boat?" asked Patsy, surprised.

"I don't know nothin' about that, sir, 'cept that I saw 'em. I asked one uh them Bishop boys, the one that runs it, where he was going, and he said they was hikin' for the other end of the lake; so I reckon that's where they are bound."

"And they started two hours ago, you say?"

"Just about that, sir."

"Do you know where we can get another boat, to follow them with?"

"I don't know nothin' about that, sir, 'cept that I sort uh reckoned that you'd want one, and so I invested a couple uh dollars uh my own money to hold it ready till you done got here."

"Good for you. The things that you don't know nothing about seem to be the best ones."

"Yassir; I reckon that's so."

"Is the boat you have hired for us a fast one?"

"I don't know noth—that is, yassir. She's faster than the other one. Mr. Miller said he thought as how you might want the fastest one, and he gave me the tip."

"Is she ready now?"

"Yassir."

"Drive us to her, then. I'll pay you well for what you have done."

"I sort uh reckoned you would do that, sir," replied the darky, grinning.

"Do you know how it happened that Mr. Miller and the other man went in the same boat?" asked Patsy, for he was still puzzled by that circumstance.

"I specks it was because they both wanted to get to the other end of the lake at about the same time. They certainly did seem mighty familiarlike with each other. They was talking and laughing together and talking about old times. But that other man—that King man—he has been here before, sir; he sure has."

"What's that? Are you sure of what you are saying?"

"I certainly am, sir."

"When was he here before?"

"Oh, he's been here purty reg'lar, sir, since about six or seven months ago. He's got some friends up the lake somewhere, so I reckon maybe he ain't going right through to the other end, so fast. I reckon he'll stop on the way. But Mr. Miller'll maybe keep right on. I don't know nothing about that."

"Hold on there, Tom. Not so fast. Tell me about those friends of Mr. King's, up the lake."

"I don't know nothing about them, sir, 'cept that one of the gals is most as dark as my youngest daughter, and the other one is like an angel; all white and rose-leaves."

"Two young ladies, eh?"

"Yassir."

"And wasn't there a gentleman with them when they came here first?"

"Yassir."

"That was in the winter when they came here first, wasn't it?"

"Yassir; most Christmas time. And the gentleman you spoke about, he was sure enough sick, he was. He couldn't speak at all; an' the rose an' white young lady was a-takin' care of him. They said he had met with a accident, or somethin'; got hurted on the way. He was all done up in bandages."

"Have you seen any of those people since they first came here?"

"No, sir; I ain't."

"Then you don't know that they are here now, do you?"

"I don't know nothing about it, 'cept that I specks they are somewhere around here. They was at a deserted farmhouse just this side uh Long Point, up there. I tried to tell Mr. Miller all about it, but he didn't have time to listen, an' he done tole me to tell you."

"Do you know where the house is located?"

"I don't know nothing about it's being located, but I know where to find it. It's sure a ramshackle old place."

"Then I think, Tom, that you had better turn your horse and hack over to somebody else to take care of it for you, and go with us in the boat up the lake. You can make more money in that way in one night than you could earn in a week with the hack."

"Yassir. That is jest about how I sized it up."

They found that the negro was true to his word.

The boat that was to take them up the lake was in readiness and waiting, and they lost little time in getting aboard of it.

"I don't understand why Miller has gone in the boat with King," said Patsy to Congdon, as they took their seats.

"I think I understand that," replied the young lawyer. "Miller has doubtless pretended to meet King by chance. From what Hank Holbrook said, it is likely that Miller's past has its shady spots. If that is so, it is more than likely that King and Miller have known each other in the old days out there, when neither were within the law."

"Perhaps that is so."

"If it is, King has jumped at the conclusion that he has found a ready helper in Miller. That's the way I see it, anyhow. And now there is one thing that I don't understand."

"What is that, Congdon?"

"This: King weakened just before we got to Utica. Just before that he was ready to take me all the way through to St. Louis, believing the opportunity would arise somewhere on the way to get rid of me. But he weakened; and, having weakened, why did he leave the train at Utica instead of waiting till he got to Syracuse? Particularly since the Ransoms are up here in this part of the State."

"I think I see through that move," replied Patsy.

"I'm glad you do. I don't."

"King has been here before. He knows the timetable. He was aware of the fact that a local would pass through that station in a few minutes after we left the limited, and he figured all the time on making a dash for it and eluding you."

"Perhaps that's right."

"It is lucky that he did select Utica for his effort, for by that means we discovered Holbrook, and Holbrook found Miller for us."

"Maybe King has subsidized Miller by this time, so that we can no longer reckon upon him," suggested Congdon.

"No, I don't think so. Holbrook was too sure of him; and, besides—no; I don't think that."

The lake was smooth and the night was calm. The boat the negro had provided proved to be a fast one, and they skimmed through the water at a rate of speed that pleased them. There was no moon, but the starlight was reasonably bright, and presently Patsy remarked:

"I wish we could see or hear the other boat. How far do you suppose they are ahead of us, Tom?" he asked of the negro.

"That *Adelaide* boat makes erbout six miles an hour, sir. I don't reckon they're more than say twelve miles up the lake," was the reply.

"How fast as we going?"

"Well, sir, we should be makin' about nine miles to their six."

"Don't you remember the exact time when they started from the wharf in Geneva?"

"Yassir. It was a quarter past ten."

"And it was a quarter past twelve when we started, so there is exactly two hours difference. How far up the lake is that house you spoke about?"

"Somethin' like fourteen miles; maybe it's fifteen, sir. I don't know just how fur it is."

"But you do know the place when you get to it?"

"Yassir."

"Very well. That is where I want you to take us. When you think you are approaching it, let me know, and I'll tell you what to do. In the meantime I'm going to take a nap, and Congdon, I think you had better do the same."

And Patsy, without more words, stretched himself in the bottom of the boat and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOUSE ON THE LAKE.

It was rather less than two hours after Patsy and his new friend left the wharf at Geneva in the power boat, when the negro announced that they were ap-

proaching the house he had mentioned in his description of events that had happened in that neighborhood since the first appearance of Basil King upon the scene, several months before.

A much-belated moon had risen in the meantime; a half-apology for a moon, but it was still enough to give them considerable additional light.

By its aid they could see a small bay that put into the shore near Norman's woods, and they could also discern the hull of another power boat—the *Adelaide*, they had no doubt—at anchor a little way off the shore.

On the bank of the lake was the house to which the negro had referred, and from two of its windows lights were gleaming brightly across the water.

Patsy leaned forward and shut off the engine at once, so that the noise of it would not reach the persons in the house; and then a big oar was put overboard with which the negro quickly and deftly sculled the boat shoreward.

Fifteen minutes later her prow grated against the pebbles of the beach, and Patsy, closely followed by Congdon, stepped ashore.

"Garvan," said the latter, as he paused for a moment to take in a deep breath of the cool and bracing air, "I feel as if the quest was about over. I feel that at last I am within striking-distance of the enemy, and you have no idea how good it feels. I am wondering, just now, what I will do with King when I get my ten fingers on him."

"I'll answer that query for you," replied Patsy, smiling.

"Well?"

"You'll turn him over to the law."

"I don't know about that. He has done too much for me to——"

"Look here, Congdon, you will have to promise me that, or I won't go a step further in this matter."

"Oh, well, if you put it that way. But, all the same, I'd like to take one fall out of him. Why, man, when I was seated opposite him in that car on the railroad, it was all I could do to keep my hand off his throat."

"I know just how you feel. I have something of the same sort of temper myself. But I have learned to control it. But, come, now; we must lose no more time."

They approached the house stealthily, and at last found a place where they could creep up beneath one of the lighted windows, and, although the space was very small through which they were able to peer into the room, Patsy could see enough to acquaint him with its contents.

Pauline was there, and so was King. Opposite him at the same table was a man whom he determined was Miller. There was a bottle and some glasses on the table. The men were smoking.

Patsy turned and whispered to Congdon:

"I am going to kick this window into the room and then follow it," he said. "You chase after me. Miller is, of course, on our side, but, all the same, I shouldn't wonder if King would put up a fight if he gets half a chance."

"Let me assure you that Pauline will do so, too," replied Congdon, also in a whisper. "But go ahead. I'm with you."

Patsy secured a position from which he could make use of his foot, and then, when all was ready, he dashed it forcibly against the frame of the window so that it was sent crashing into the room, the shattering glass making a great noise as it fell in showers over the floor.

Then, before those inside of the room could recover from their surprise, Patsy leaped forward and downward and landed in the midst of them, at the same time presenting a pistol at King, who in starting from his chair to his feet had tripped and fallen and was now lying on his back upon the floor, to which Miller had pinned him.

But Pauline uttered a cry, more of rage than of fright, and drew a pistol from among the folds of her dress; and, like a flash, she aimed it at Congdon and pulled the trigger.

Just as she did that, just when her bullet would have done its deadly work and have slain James Congdon, an event that was alike unexpected by all concerned, happened.

A door which led upon the hallway of the house was suddenly thrown open, and a man with a piece of chain hanging to each of his wrists, jumped through the opening. He was closely followed by a girlish-looking woman who also had pieces of chain clinging to her. They were John Y. Ransom and his daughter Irma.

As Ransom bounded through the doorway, he was within reach of Congdon, and as if he realized what was happening and knew that he was in time to prevent it, he seized the young man by one shoulder and hurled him backward, thus rescuing him from the bullet that would have killed him, and causing it to pass harmlessly over his head; and as the young man was thrown backward, he fairly fell into the arms of

Irma, who had followed her father through the doorway.

As Ransom threw Congdon out of the way, he found himself confronted by Pauline, whose black eyes were blazing as she again raised the pistol to fire, this time full at the heart of the man who had cared for her all her life.

She pulled the trigger, too; but the cartridge snapped. It did not explode, and the next instant the weapon was torn from her grasp, and Patsy said to her:

"I think we have had about enough gun-play for one night, Miss Hastings."

In the meantime Miller had snapped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of Basil King, and had disarmed him; and now he stepped backward and said coolly, in a voice which made Patsy start with surprise:

"Larry Dorking, I arrest you for the murder of your half-brother, Henry Hastings, which occurred ten years ago in Texas," and he threw aside a wig he had been wearing, and Nick Carter stood revealed.

Patsy gazed in astonishment, first upon his chief and then upon the prisoner; and finally he exclaimed:

"I thought you were on your way to Texas, chief. How in the world did you get here?"

"An accident," replied Nick, smiling. "Just a real accident; nothing more. When the train on which I was a passenger was passing through Utica, there was a row on the station platform, and I got off to help the officer, who was getting the worst of it. My train went off and left me, and I found in the officer an old friend, Hank Holbrook, once a cowboy, later a secret service officer at Washington, and now living at his ease at Utica and doing police duty just to keep himself out of mischief. I had to wait there for the next train, anyhow, and I told Hank what I was going to Texas after, knowing that he had spent years down there and might know some of the parties. Well, he did; and he also knew Lawyer King, whose real name is Larry Dorking. He told me that King had some sort of a country place near Geneva, and had had it about six months, so I decided that I would take the next local that came along and go to Geneva, to investigate. It occurred to me that the country place Hank mentioned might be the hiding-place of the missing persons.

"Well, Patsy, it so happened that I was on that train to which King escaped when he broke and ran for it on the station at Utica. Hank had just left me when he spoke to you, so he told me over the telephone. I did not see you there, of course. Neither did I know that King was on the train until a man came through shouting for Bad Miller, the name under which I was traveling. Hank had telephoned ahead for him to board the train and find me and tell me all about what had happened. Well, I went through the train and found King. I sat down beside him. I became confidential, and finally led him to believe that I was making for Canada, by way of Niagara Falls, but didn't dare go there. He bit like a perch. He offered to hide me for a time if I would serve him and ask no questions. I agreed, of course, and he'll tell you that I haven't asked a question. When we got here, I was shown the prisoners, who were fastened in their rooms with chains and staples—adjoining rooms where they could talk with each other. While King and that angelic young spitfire over there, Pauline, were eating, I managed to saw through the chain that held Irma; but I was called back to this room, and so I left the little saw with Irma. I guess she did the rest. Now you know the whole story. The entire case has been a succession of coincidences such as I have never seen equaled."

"But how did you know that King is the murderer of Hastings?"

"Hank told me over the telephone. He heard Congdon repeat the fact to you, while you were in Utica. I managed to talk with him from Geneva, while I was away from King arranging for the boat."

"So you are Nick Carter?" exclaimed Ransom, stepping forward and shaking hands. "And you are his assistant, Patsy. I owe you both more than I can repay. Jimmy"—he turned toward the spot where Congdon had stood, but he and Irma had both disappeared. "I reckon they'll do it to each other for me," he finished. "Pauline, what shall I say to you?"

"Nothing," she replied coolly, but with eyes that were fiercely blazing; and she turned her back to him.

"How were you abducted?" asked Nick, interrupting that scene.

"Why, it was dead easy. Pauline did it with an automobile and a hired chauffeur. I took a drink out of a flask that was filled with knockout drops. King was handy by, and the rest was easy. Don't ask me what they intended to do with us, for I don't know. But it's all right now. It's all right now."

"You bet it is!" said Congdon, entering the room at that moment, and one arm was around Irma Ransom.

THE END.

The next number, 623, will contain "Pauline—A Mystery; or, Nick Carter's Swimming Chase."

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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TOD'S RANCH.

By J. R. HAMMOND.

It was one of those bleak and wintry nights that sometimes make their appearance the latter part of November. In a miserable hovel sat a woman and a little girl crouching over a few dying embers, vainly endeavoring to keep themselves warm, and looking as though it would be a blessing to them if they could only die out along with the fire over which they were shivering. Everything about the hovel, the two occupants not excepted, indicated a state of abject destitution strongly suggestive of starvation.

The hovel was known as Tod's Ranch, which distinctive cognomen it had acquired from two peculiarities of its owner, one of which was a habit he had of always speaking of it as his ranch, the other was invariably recommending a "tod" for all ills that flesh is heir to. From footache to typhoid fever and consumption, his stereotyped advice was: "Take a tod." If too hot, "It'll cool you;" if chilly, "It'll warm you up;" if nervous, "It'll quiet you;" if prostrate, "It'll rouse you up."

As he believed in a man practising what he preached, and taking for his own maladies what he prescribed for the ailings of others, and as scarcely a day passed that he was not out of sorts in some shape or other several times during the day, it so happened that his calls for "tods" were not like angels' visits, few and far between, the consequence of which was the sobriquet of "Tod" adhering first to the owner of the ranch, and then to the ranch itself.

For the last seven years Tod's Ranch had been annually the scene of a most mysterious and heartrending calamity, the direct result of which was the reduction of the members of the family from nine to two, and indirectly bringing those down from a condition of comparative comfort to a state of abject destitution.

On that night seven years ago Jerry Malone had mysteriously disappeared, since which time no trace of him had ever been discovered. Twelve months later their oldest boy, a youth some twenty years of age, had disappeared in an equally mysterious manner. And thus, year by year, Mrs. Malone had been called on to mourn the disappearance of her husband and six sons, in a manner that not only baffled all effort at unraveling the mystery of their taking off, but which was actually more unendurable than the knowledge of their death would have been, as that would have relieved her at once of all suspense, while as it was her mind was constantly tormented by the most harassing conjectures.

"Mother," said the child, as she threw a few chips on the fire to prevent its going out altogether, "do you know that to-morrow will be Thanksgiving Day?"

"Do I know it? Alas! but too well." Then, after a pause, she continued: "I wonder what calamity this night has in store for us. It can't be sudden death, for that would be a blessing compared to the slow but certain approaches he is now making in the shape of starvation. It may be that you are to be taken from me in the same way that your father and brothers have been taken. Then, indeed, my cup of misery would be filled to overflowing, and death would be a most welcome guest."

"Don't talk in that way," exclaimed the child, as she crouched still closer to her mother's side, "you frighten me."

After a brief interval of silence the mother covered up the fire, and the two, without the formalities of undressing, lay down on a pallet in one corner of the apartment, and covered themselves with the tattered remains of what had once been bedclothes. The child fell asleep almost immediately. Not so the mother. Hour after hour she lay awake, wooing in vain the approach of the drowsy god. Nine, ten, eleven o'clock sounded shrill and clear from the distant town clock, and still she slumbered not. Another hour dragged its slow length along, and then the chimes for twelve came floating upon the midnight air. Scarcely had the last sound died upon the breeze, when Mrs. Malone, who was still as wide-awake as when she first lay down, was startled by a rap at the door.

"Who's there?"

"A stranger in a strange place," was the answer, in a strange voice.

"What do you want?"

"I want shelter from the storm and something to eat."

"Why don't you go to a hotel?"

"Beggars are not the most popular patrons of hotels," was the reply of the stranger.

Perplexed by a host of contending emotions, Mrs. Malone finally tottered across the room, and, opening the door, admitted the stranger to such hospitalities as even she in her penury was able to dispense. Kindling a fire, she placed before her guest a loaf of bread and a roasted fowl that she had procured for herself and daughter's Thanksgiving dinner. Hoping for her daughter's sake that he would leave at least a portion of both loaf and fowl, she witnessed the last crumb of the former and the last shred of the latter disappear down the stranger's throat without any outward manifestation of displeasure.

After conversing a while, the stranger began to manifest signs of drowsiness, and being informed that there were no sleeping-arrangements of which he could avail himself, coiled himself on the floor in front of the fire and was soon snoring apparently as comfortably as though reposing on a bed of down.

Along toward daylight Mrs. Malone appeared to feel signs of drowsiness, until finally she was compelled to succumb, and fell into a deep sleep, from which she did not awake until broad daylight. As the occurrences of the preceding night dawned upon her mind, fearful apprehensions began to flow in upon her, when, springing from her humble couch to her feet, what was her horror to discover that she was alone—that her worst fears were realized, and that her last remaining child had been snatched from her as remorselessly, if not as mysteriously, as the others.

Dropping to the floor in a swoon from which she did not recover for many hours, she finally opened her eyes, when she became cognizant of a state of things that filled her with wonder most profound and inexpressible.

First and foremost, she herself was arrayed in garments which, for fineness of texture and gorgeousness of appear-

ance, might have adorned the person of an Eastern princess. Next, the apartment in which she was reposing, though corresponding in many respects with her own home, was fitted up in a style of magnificence that left her overwhelmed in a flood of bewilderment as to its identity.

Indeed, she began to entertain strong doubts as to her own identity. Surely, she thought, she could not be the same person who, clothed in tattered garments that scarcely sufficed to cover her nakedness, had fallen in a swoon, as it seemed, but a moment before.

"Surely it must be a dream," she exclaimed.

In the middle of the room sat a table, which, if tables are actually addicted to groaning on account of being overloaded with "grub," including all the delicacies that almost unlimited wealth could produce, that table must have been in a state of suppressed groaning that would be difficult to restrain much longer.

Hearing sounds of hilarity somewhere in the neighborhood, she stepped out of the door, and, walking around the house, discovered a large tent stretched in the back yard, from which sounds of revelry and mirth were issuing. Pausing a moment in utter bewilderment, she presently heard, above the surrounding din, a well-known voice shouting, with the voice of a second-hand Stentor:

"Got a headache, did you say? Take a tod. Best thing in the world for a headache."

To spring to the tent, burst through the door, and pounce on the speaker was but the work of a moment, and was accomplished before he had fairly finished recommending his favorite prescription.

The long-lost husband had returned, and he and his wife were once more locked in each other's embrace.

There, too, was her daughter, at the discovery of whose disappearance she had swooned in rags, and from which she had awakened in splendor.

Further discoveries she made in startling succession.

First a boy, clad in costly apparel that a prince might have envied, sprang into her arms, when she discovered that she held to her bosom her own youngest son, who had disappeared, a perfect tatterdemalion, but a year before.

Next, one by one, her other missing boys discovered themselves in the same way, some of whom had grown entirely out of her knowledge, among them the ragamuffin who had enjoyed her hospitality the night before, devoured without the least compunction of conscience her Thanksgiving dinner, and wound up by stealing her only remaining child.

Noticing that his better half was laboring under nervous excitement consequent upon such a succession of startling surprises, the long-lost husband shouted to her:

"Say, Betsy, nervous, ain't you? Better take a tod."

Having imbibed the "tod," Mrs. Malone expressed a desire to have the mystery of the gradual disappearance and sudden reappearance of her husband and boys explained; whereupon Jerry, after imbibing a tod, cleared his throat, and then began the solution of the mystery by propounding a series of interrogatories:

"You recollect Dick Cummins, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Used to be an old flame of yours?"

"Yes."

"Give him the mitten?"

"Yes."

"Sacked him for me?"

"Yes. But what has that got to do with it? That happened nearly, if not quite, thirty years ago."

"Don't bother me, old woman. I'm coming at it by degrees, like the frog swallowed the grubbing-hoe. Some time after you had sacked him you met him at a ball at Wiley's, and danced with him?"

"Yes."

"And while the dance was going on he inquired if what he had heard was true, that you and Jerry Malone were going to be married?"

"Yes, I recollect that mighty well."

"And when you told him it was, he swore he would have his revenge on you and me both, if it took him fifty years to accomplish it?"

"Yes, I shall never forget that. He had the most fiendish look of any man I ever saw, and scared me nearly to death."

"Well, he's had his revenge."

"What! you don't mean to say that Dick Cummins was at the bottom of the disappearance of you and the boys?"

"He was—not only at the bottom, but at the top, too, and all around the edges. Planned the whole thing, and carried it into execution."

"Why, I thought he'd left the country and turned pirate?"

"So he did. Made a big thing of it, too—millions on top of millions, and in the hard stuff, at that. Greenbacks ain't a legal tender among pirates."

Pausing a moment to moisten his lips with a "tod," Mrs. Malone's impatience prompted her to inquire:

"What did he do with you, and how did he treat you?"

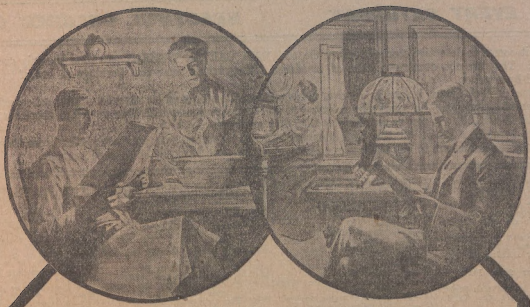
"He took us to his cave, and locked us up in a sort of den that he had built in one corner of the cave for our especial benefit, and there he kept us locked up from one year's end to another, with nothing to do but eat and sleep. Can't say that I have any special fault to find with the treatment, only a decided objection to being locked up so long."

"How did you get away at last, and where did all these things come from?"

"Billy, there"—pointing to their youngest boy—"bossed that job. I tell you, old woman, that boy's sharper than a steel trap. Why, he hadn't been in our den hardly long enough for Cummins to get out of hearing, when he says to us: 'You may all stay here as long as you feel like it, but I'm not going to stay with you long.' One day we found him on his knees, working away with his Barlow knife on a piece of soft rock that he had found running under the wall of our den. Stimulated by his example, the balance of us went to work, and in the course of a few weeks had the satisfaction of seeing Billy crawl through the hole and then crawl back. Then we held a council of war, to decide whether to enlarge the hole so that we could all escape, or send Billy after some officers to arrest the robbers and release us, when, at Billy's suggestion, it was decided to do neither, but to set Billy on the hunt for Cummins' treasure, which we were satisfied must be enormous, and then mature our plans for escape afterward. So Billy went to work with a will, and after coming within an ace of being caught scores of times, his hazardous enterprise was crowned with success so far as the discovery of the place where the treasure was concealed consisted.

"The next thing in order was to release us, which he finally accomplished by stealing the key to our den while they were sleeping off a drunken debauch, and then, as delay was dangerous, we proceeded immediately to where the robbers were asleep, and with their own arms slew the last one of them with as little compunction as we would have despatched so many rattlesnakes.

"The next thing on the docket," resumed Jerry, "was to get into the strong box, which at the first glance threatened to be rather a formidable undertaking. But while we older ones were perplexing our minds as to how it was to be accomplished, Billy solved the mystery by producing a key that he had taken from Cummins. On unlocking the box and raising the lid, the sight of the silver and gold, and diamonds and other precious stones, fairly took the breath away from me. Why, old woman, there was just millions on top of millions of dollars' worth of them, and we've got it all where Cummins' ghost'll hardly be apt to trouble it. As it only wanted a few weeks of the anniversary of Billy's disappearance when we were released, and as that day had been set apart as Thanksgiving Day, we concluded to postpone our coming until then, and give you a surprise. And now it's dinner-time and dinner's ready, let's take a tod all round and go and eat it."



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